WAR AND DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING*

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Abstract

We provide the first global, long-run evidence on how war reshapes democratic institutions. Using data on all conflicts since 1948, we show that the onset of conflict causes a large and persistent decline in democracy: institutions weaken immediately, continue to erode for nearly a decade, and do not recover. Yet this deterioration is highly selective. It appears only in first-time conflicts, intrastate wars, highly fractionalized societies, and conflicts that governments win. The decline operates through political channels – media censorship, judicial purges, curtailed civil liberties, irregular leadership turnover, and constitutional suspensions - rather than through any functional requirement of war-making. Autocratization does not increase the probability of victory, and institutional instability reduces it. Taken together, the findings show that war does not require autocracy; it enables executives to expand their authority and implement institutional changes that would be difficult to enact in peacetime. *JEL codes:* D72, D74, P48, H56.

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I. Introduction

"War almost always enlarges the powers of civil government; it adds to the functions of the State what ought to belong to private individuals."

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, part 4, Chapter 6.

War disrupts institutions. It can rally citizens around their leaders, reinforce national unity, and sustain democratic resolve. It can also empower executives, suppress dissent, and erode the constraints that define democratic governance. Classic accounts portray war as a force for state building and institutional strengthening (Tilly, 1992), while others emphasize how conflict can create openings for elite consolidation and institutional erosion (e.g., Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006) and open the door for emergency powers and executive aggrandizement (Lowande and Rogowski, 2021; Rasler and Thompson, 1985). How these forces balance—and under what conditions war alters the trajectory of democratic institutions—remains an open question. This paper provides the first global, long-run assessment of how war reshapes democratic institutions and the environments in which democracies fail.

Our analysis relies on a comprehensive conflict dataset developed by Benmelech and Monteiro (2025b) that pairs all belligerent countries with an appropriate set of control countries for each conflict episode. Because countries may participate in multiple conflicts, we organize the data at the conflict–country–year level and construct a separate event window around each onset. For each conflict, the treated group includes only countries that participate in the conflict and remain free of other conflicts within the event window. The control group consists solely of countries that do not participate and remain conflict-free during the same window. This stacked design ensures that treated countries are compared only to never-treated units, providing clean counterfactuals for how institutions evolve around the onset of conflicts. To measure these institutions, we draw on the Varieties of Democracy (V–Dem) dataset, which provides globally comparable, high-resolution indicators of electoral, liberal, and participatory dimensions of democracy. Our primary outcome is V–Dem's aggregate democracy index, a widely used summary measure of core institutional features.

The central challenge for identification is that conflict is not randomly assigned. Autocracies may be more inclined to initiate conflicts, or countries with weakening democratic institutions may be more prone to slide into war. We address these concerns in three steps. First, the likelihood that a country is in conflict is not correlated with its

level of democracy in the years preceding onset, indicating that autocracies are not disproportionately likely to enter conflict. Second, treated countries experience *improvements* - not declines - in democratic institutions before conflict, ruling out the concern that political deterioration drives conflict participation. Third, our event–study specification includes conflict-country and conflict–region–year fixed effects, which absorb time-invariant geopolitical conditions (such as permanently hostile neighbors) and region-specific shocks or trends. Taken together, these facts support a causal interpretation: the democratic erosion we document reflects the consequences of conflict, not underlying trajectories or selection into war.

Conflict generates a large and persistent decline in democratic institutions. On impact, the democracy index falls by roughly 3% in treated countries relative to controls. Democracy continues to decline for eight years after conflict begins—even though the median conflict lasts only three years. A decade after onset, treated countries exhibit democracy levels 13% below those of the control group. The magnitude is economically meaningful: the estimated ten-year change lies in the 14th percentile of the global distribution of decade-long changes, meaning that 86% of all observed shifts in democracy worldwide are less negative than our estimated effect.

Treated countries do not exhibit deteriorating institutions before onset; if anything, they show mild improvements relative to controls. These positive pre-trends work against finding a post-onset decline and therefore reinforce a causal interpretation. Eliminating our estimated effects would require implausibly large reversals of these trends, exceeding anything observed in the data. Moreover, when we remove the small set of episodes with unusually steep pre-conflict movements, the post-onset declines remain unchanged. This indicates that the pre-conflict improvements we document are not mechanically related to the deterioration that follows.

The decline in democracy unfolds through multiple channels. Conflict triggers large and persistent increases in media censorship and judicial purges, and both effects are substantial relative to global ten-year changes. Conflict also reduces core civil liberties: freedom of association falls by roughly 20% a decade after onset, and governments come to rely more heavily on the military as a base of political support—a pattern consistent with the rise in military spending we document. Conflict further affects political turnover and the constitutional order. Treated countries become more likely to replace leaders through extra-legal means—such as coups, forced resignations, or assassinations—and more likely to suspend their constitutions. Taken together, these patterns show that conflict restructures political authority in ways that empower incumbents but do not necessarily improve the chances of victory.

The consequences of conflict for democracy are highly heterogeneous. First-time conflicts generate a large and persistent institutional decline, whereas recurrent conflicts do not. Intrastate conflicts erode democracy; interstate conflicts do not. The deterioration is concentrated in countries with high ethnic fractionalization, where internal divisions magnify the political returns to repression. And the decline is asymmetric across outcomes: losing countries experience no deterioration, while winners exhibit sharp and lasting democratic decay. These patterns point toward a common conclusion: the settings in which democracy erodes are precisely those in which executives have the strongest incentives and opportunities to consolidate power.

Why, then, does conflict erode democracy only in certain places and only under certain conditions? One possibility is that democratic backsliding is necessary to win a war. We test this view by examining whether changes in democracy from the onset to the end of a conflict predict victory. We find no evidence that democratic backsliding is associated with a higher likelihood of victory. If anything, institutional instability reduces the probability of victory. Democratic backsliding is therefore unlikely to reflect functional demands of war. Any credible explanation must account for the selective patterns documented above.

The evidence instead points toward a political mechanism: conflict creates opportunities for executives to expand their authority and weaken institutional constraints. Four facts support this view. First, institutional decline occurs well after conflict begins, even though most conflicts are short, and appears even in short conflicts. Second, deterioration arises only in environments where political incentives for consolidation are strongest—first conflicts, internal conflicts, fractionalized societies, and victorious governments. Third, the mechanisms of decline—purges, censorship, curtailed civil liberties, and constitutional suspensions—are political rather than military in nature. Fourth, autocratization does not improve military performance. Taken together, these findings indicate that conflict does not require autocracy; rather, conflict makes autocratization politically advantageous. Conflict reshapes domestic politics in ways that weaken opposition, expand coercive capacity, and allow leaders to enact institutional changes that would be difficult or impossible in peacetime.

This paper builds on four strands of work in political economy. A first tradition studies how civil conflict reshapes institutions, emphasizing persistence, elite incentives, and the long-run consequences of violence (Acemoglu, Vindigni and Ticchi, 2010b; Acemoglu, Ticchi and Vindigni, 2010a; Besley and Persson, 2009, 2010). Related work shows that internal conflict can disrupt political competition, reinforce ruling coalitions, or weaken

constraints on the executive.[1] A second tradition examines how conflict interacts with regime stability, coups, and democratic breakdown, documenting how political crises frequently trigger extra-legal leadership change and institutional erosion (Collier and Rohner, 2008; Marinov and Goemans, 2014; Fortna and Huang, 2012; Lipset, 1959; Ralston and Krebs, 2018; Merkel, 2013; Grimm and Merkel, 2013; Bakke et al., 2025).[2]

A third strand examines war, emergency powers, and executive aggrandizement. Classic accounts emphasize state-building dynamics (Tilly, 1992), while others highlight how conflict enables governments to justify extraordinary measures that weaken democratic checks (Lowande and Rogowski, 2021; Rasler and Thompson, 1985). Finally, work on democratic peace studies how regime type shapes conflict initiation and war outcomes (Reiter and Stam, 2010; Hess and Orphanides, 2001; De Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson and Smith, 1999; Baliga, Lucca and Sjöström, 2011).[3] However, a central gap remains: we lack systematic, global evidence on *when*, *where*, and *why* wars erode democratic institutions. This paper addresses that gap by providing the first long-run, cross-national assessment of the institutional consequences of conflict, identifying the environments in which democracies fail and the political mechanisms that link war to democratic backsliding.

Section II describes the data. Section III documents the effects of conflict on democracy. Section IV studies the settings in which democracy declines. Section V turns to the mechanisms driving the decline in democracy. Section VI concludes.

II. Data

II.A Data Sources

We describe the main data sources used in our analysis below. We describe the main variables we use in greater detail in Online Appendix Table A.1.

1. Conflict. Our main data source is the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program. It records all armed conflicts worldwide.[4] A conflict meets four criteria. First, it involves the use of armed force. Second, it causes at least 25

[1] See Blattman (2009); Blattman and Miguel (2010); Fearon and Laitin (2003); Sambanis (2004); Nunn and Wantchekon (2011).

[2] Some studies, such as Fjelde and Smidt (2022), Kissling and Smidt (2023) and Blair et al. (2023), have studied the importance of peacekeepers in shaping the impact of conflict on the quality of democratic institutions.

[3] There is also a larger literature that studies "democratic peace" - the fact that democracies are less likely to engage in conflict (Lake, 1992; Maoz and Russett, 1993; Russet, 1994; Schultz, 1999; Hegre, 2014).

[4] We use the 24.1 version of the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset, developed by Gleditsch et al. (2002) and Davies et al. (2024).

battle-related deaths per year. Third, at least two parties are involved, one of which must be a state government. Fourth, the conflict must be over an incompatibility, either about government—such as the political system or control of the central government—or about territory. The dataset covers 299 conflicts. For each, it reports the parties involved, the conflict's location or locations, and the type of incompatibility.

2. *Democracy.* To measure the quality of democratic institutions, we draw on the Varieties of Democracy (V–Dem) project, which has become the state-of-the-art standard in political science and is increasingly dominant in political economy. V–Dem provides a high-resolution portrait of political regimes from the early twentieth century to the present.[5] Its chief advantage is its granularity: rather than imposing a single composite measure, V–Dem reports separate indices for electoral competition, liberal constraints on the executive, participatory inclusion, deliberative processes, and egalitarian protections, together with hundreds of lower-level indicators that trace the mechanics of each institutional layer.

Our primary outcome is V–Dem's aggregate democracy index, defined as the simple average of its five headline components: electoral (which captures the extent to which a country holds clean and fair elections), liberal (which captures the extent to which there are checks and balances), egalitarian (which assesses whether all social groups have equal access to political power and public resources), participatory (which measures the degree to which citizens engage in political life beyond voting), and deliberative democracy (which measures the quality of public reasoning and deliberation in political decision-making). All these indices take values between zero and one, where a higher value denotes a higher quality of democratic institutions. The cross-sectional distributions of these indices are shown in Online Appendix Figure A.2.

3. *Constitutional Changes.* We complement these measures with data on constitutional change from the Comparative Constitutions Project, the most comprehensive source of constitutional text and institutional rules worldwide. We use their Constitutional Chronology dataset, which records constitutional amendments, the adoption of new constitutions, and episodes in which constitutions are suspended. These data cover 191 countries between 1789 and 2019. These events provide a direct measure of formal institutional change and allow us to trace how conflicts reshape the legal architecture of political authority. We present summary statistics for these data in Online Appendix Figure A.3,

[5] V–Dem is based on a large, decentralized expert-survey design. Country specialists assess institutional practices following detailed, conceptually anchored guidelines, and a Bayesian item-response model aggregates these evaluations while correcting for coder bias and uncertainty.

where we show the number of changes to the constitutional order over time, and in Online Appendix Figure A.4, where we plot the distribution of the total number of changes to the constitutional order across countries.

4. Leaders. We also use data on national leaders from the Archigos dataset, which identifies the effective ruler—the individual who de facto exercises executive authority—for 189 countries from 1875 to 2014.[6] Archigos records both the mode of entry and the mode of exit, allowing us to identify irregular, extra-legal transitions into and out of power. These data provide a direct window into political turnover and the fragility of executive authority. In Online Appendix Figure A.5 we show evidence on leader turnover over time. In Online Appendix Figure A.6 we show that irregular turnover has been declining over time.

5. Aggregate Data. We use the Global Macro Database developed by Müller et al. (2025). This dataset has information on a wide range of aggregate outcomes for many countries.

II.B Constructing the Dataset

We study how the onset of conflict shapes the quality of democratic institutions. A key challenge is that countries often experience more than one conflict, which implies repeated treatments.[7] To address this, we organize the data at the conflict–country–year level and estimate a stacked event study.

For each conflict c, we define treated countries as those that participate directly, either as primary combatants or as supporting states contributing troops.[8] We exclude any treated country that engages in a different conflict from five years before to ten years after the onset of c. This restriction isolates the effect of conflict c itself. If no treated countries remain after this filter, we drop conflict c from the sample. Control countries are defined as those that do not participate in c and remain conflict-free over the same window. Hence, the control group consists solely of never-treated states *within the event window*.

Our dataset covers 135 conflicts, 78% of which are intrastate, involving a state and rebel groups.[9] Figure I plots the number of countries in conflict over time, split into

[6] This dataset was created by Goemans, Gleditsch and Chiozza (2009).

[7] We present the distribution of the number of conflicts per treated country in our final sample in Online Appendix Figure A.1. Two-thirds of treated countries are treated more than once.

[8] A country is classified as treated if it appears in any of the following fields: `gwno_a`, `gwno_b`, `gwno_a_2nd`, and `gwno_b_2nd` .

[9] We begin with 299 conflicts, corresponding to 364 conflict episodes once intermittent conflicts are

autocracies or democracies. For each year, we compute the cross-sectional median of the aggregate democracy index and classify countries below the median as autocracies. Most conflicts involve autocracies. In particular, there are years in which there are no conflicts involving democracies. We have 115 unique treated countries and 221 unique control countries.

Most conflicts are short, with a median duration of three years. Yet, as Online Appendix Figure A.7 shows, the distribution has a long right tail: the average duration is about ten years.

II.C Summary Statistics

We study 115 treated countries, shown in Figure II. Our sample is tilted toward countries that engage in conflict infrequently, since we require that treated countries not participate in more than one conflict at a time. For instance, the United States appears only twice in our sample, while Canada appears three times. The regional composition is also uneven: there are more conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa and Western Asia than in Northern and Southern Europe and Latin America.[10] We also show in Online Appendix Figure A.9 that the distribution of treated countries in our sample closely resembles that of the full universe of conflicts. This similarity indicates that the filters we impose — such as excluding countries engaged in overlapping conflicts — do not materially alter the composition of treated countries. Hence, our results can be interpreted as representative of the broader population of conflict episodes rather than an artifact of sample construction.

We also observe the resolution of the conflict. For 35% of our conflicts, we observe a clear victory for one side. We rely on the classification created by the UCDP. We show the evolution of the number of conflicts with a victory and without a victory over time in Online Appendix Figure A.10. In Online Appendix Figure A.11 we demonstrate that the share of intrastate conflicts or high-intensity conflicts is not different between conflicts with a victory and conflicts without a victory. However, conflicts with a victory tend to be shorter.

To ensure comparability between treated and control groups, we conduct a balance exercise. For each outcome, we take one observation per conflict and country in the year preceding the onset of conflict, standardize it within conflict, and regress it on a treatment

counted separately. Our final dataset therefore covers 37% of all conflict episodes. In the full sample, 85% are intrastate. These shares are very similar in our restricted sample, indicating that our filters do not materially alter the composition of conflicts.

[10]The regional distribution of treated countries, compared to that of all countries worldwide, is shown in Online Appendix Figure A.8.

indicator with conflict fixed effects.[11] Errors are clustered at the conflict level. Results are reported in Figure III.

Overall, treated and control countries look similar.[12] We find no differences in the main democracy indices, indicating that autocracies are not disproportionately selected into conflict. Two contrasts stand out. First, treated countries exhibit higher levels of political corruption and more frequent judicial purges (a lower value on the purge index reflects more purges). Second, consistent with the higher share of military spending in GDP documented by Benmelech and Monteiro (2025b), executives in treated countries are more likely to rely on the military as their primary base of political support.

These differences may raise concerns about selection into conflict.[13] We therefore turn next to a systematic analysis of selection, where we examine whether political or institutional conditions predict entry into conflict and whether pre-trends threaten our identification strategy.

II.D Selection into Conflict

A natural concern is that conflict is not randomly assigned. Autocracies may be disproportionately likely to engage in conflict, consistent with the fact that many conflict episodes involve non-democratic regimes, or countries with deteriorating democratic institutions may be more prone to initiate or enter conflicts.[14]

To assess these possibilities, we estimate the correlation between conflict at time t and the level of democracy h periods earlier using

$$\text{Conflict}_{i,t} = \mu_i + \lambda_{r(i),t} + \gamma\,\text{Democracy}_{i,t-h} + \beta X_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t}, \tag{1}$$

where the outcome is an indicator equal to one if country i is in conflict in year t, and

[11] For each variable and conflict, we take its value in the year preceding the onset of conflict, yielding one observation per country (treated and control). For each conflict, we then compute the average and standard deviation across all countries (treated and control). We then standardize by subtracting the mean and dividing by the standard deviation.

[12] Benmelech and Monteiro (2025b) report no systematic differences in economic fundamentals between treated and control countries, and Benmelech and Monteiro (2025a) show that economic variables are generally poor predictors of conflict.

[13] To the extent that such differences are time-invariant, they are absorbed by the conflict–country fixed effects in our estimation.

[14] We present the distribution of the aggregate democracy index for the period preceding the onset of conflict across all conflicts in Online Appendix Figure A.12. We find that, on average, treated countries exhibit a higher level of quality of democratic institutions, measured by our democracy index, when compared to control countries. Moreover, the distributions of quality of democratic institutions for treated and control countries have similar shapes.

zero if otherwise. We include country (μ_i) and region–year ($\lambda_{r(i),t}$, where $r(i)$ denotes the region of country i) fixed effects, and control for the logarithm of real GDP per capita and the logarithm of population. The coefficient of interest, γ, captures the correlation between democracy $h = 1, \ldots, 5$ periods before t and the incidence of conflict. Standard errors are clustered at the country level. Results are reported in Table I.

We find no evidence that autocracies select into conflict. Across all horizons h, the likelihood of conflict is uncorrelated with the level of democracy h periods earlier.

A second concern is dynamic: even if autocracies do not disproportionately select into conflict, countries experiencing democratic backsliding may be more prone to engage in war. To examine this, we compute the average aggregate democracy index for treated and control countries in each year $t = -5, \ldots, 20$ relative to the onset of conflict, and plot the two series in Figure IV.

The data provide no support for pre-conflict deterioration in democratic institutions. Treated and control countries follow similar trends in the years preceding conflict; if anything, treated countries experience slightly faster improvements. After conflict begins, however, the paths diverge sharply: control countries remain on their pre-existing trend, whereas treated countries exhibit a marked slowdown in institutional development.

III. The Effect of Conflict on Democracy

This section traces the political consequences of conflict. We first describe our empirical strategy and show that selection into conflict does not confound identification. We then document the baseline effect: conflict sets countries on a markedly lower democratic path. Finally, we unpack the mechanisms behind this decline, showing that conflict erodes checks on executive power, restricts civil liberties, reshapes leadership turnover, and disrupts constitutional order. The result is a systematic and enduring weakening of democratic governance.

III.A Empirical Strategy

Our goal is to estimate how the onset of conflict affects the quality of democratic institutions. We implement a stacked event study following Benmelech and Monteiro (2025b):

$$Y_{c,i,t} = \mu_{c,i} + \lambda_{c,r(i),t} + \sum_{\tau=-5,\, \tau\neq -1}^{10} \gamma_\tau \, 1\{t = \tau\} \, 1\{(i,c) \in \text{Treated}\} + \varepsilon_{c,i,t}, \tag{2}$$

where $Y_{c,i,t}$ is the outcome for country i in conflict episode c and year $t = -5, \ldots, 10$ relative to the onset of conflict. We include conflict–country fixed effects $\mu_{c,i}$ and conflict–region–year fixed effects $\lambda_{c,r(i),t}$ ($r(i)$ denotes the region of country i).[15] The coefficients γ_τ measure the effect of conflict on treated countries τ years from the onset of conflict, relative to control countries. Standard errors are clustered at the conflict level, the unit of treatment.[16]

Estimating event studies such as equation (2) using OLS may generate the bad comparisons problem emphasized by Goodman-Bacon (2021), Sun and Abraham (2021), and Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021). The concern is that treated units may be implicitly compared to other already-treated units, which may introduce a bias in the estimation. We address this by restricting the control group to *never-treated* countries—those not involved in any conflict during the relevant event window. This design choice ensures that treated countries are compared only to units that remain conflict-free, eliminating contamination from prior or simultaneous treatments. In doing so, we follow the best practices established in recent advances in the difference-in-differences literature (De Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille, 2020; Borusyak, Jaravel and Spiess, 2024).

The assumption that conflict is an exogenous shock is unlikely to hold, because conflict is not randomly assigned. We have shown that autocracies are not disproportionately likely to enter conflict and that countries with worsening democratic institutions do not select into conflict. Yet conflict remains shaped by long-run political conditions and by regional cycles. To address this, we include conflict–country fixed effects, which absorb time-invariant determinants such as permanently hostile neighbors or a state's underlying bellicosity. We further include conflict–region–year fixed effects, which flexibly capture regional variation in conflict risk and regional trends that might otherwise confound identification. Together, these controls limit the influence of persistent geopolitical conditions and allow us to isolate the causal effect of conflict itself.

[15] Regions are: Southern Asia, Western Asia, South-Eastern Asia, Eastern Asia, Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, Southern Europe, Polynesia, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, North America, Northern Europe, North Africa, Melanesia, Micronesia, Oceania, and other nations.

[16] Each onset of conflict defines a treatment episode, and our stacked design creates one panel per episode, pairing treated countries with control countries outside conflict during the same window. Clustering at the conflict level captures serial correlation and common shocks within an episode. Clustering at the country level would understate uncertainty, since countries may appear in multiple episodes but the identifying variation is within-episode.

III.B Baseline Results

We estimate equation (2) using the aggregate democracy index as the outcome. The results are presented in Figure V.

Conflict generates a large and persistent decline in democratic institutions. On impact, the onset of conflict reduces the aggregate democracy index by roughly 3%. The decline deepens over time: democracy continues to fall for eight years after conflict begins, indicating that the institutional consequences of conflict are both gradual and persistent. This persistence is notable, given that the median conflict in our sample lasts only three years. A decade after onset, the democracy index remains 13% lower in treated countries relative to control countries.[17]

The event–study estimates exhibit clear pre-treatment patterns. In particular, we find evidence of *positive selection*: in the years preceding conflict, treated countries experience faster improvements in democratic institutions than control countries. This pattern works against finding declines in democracy and thus strengthens the interpretation that the post-onset deterioration is driven by conflict rather than by underlying trends. The onset of conflict abruptly reverses this trajectory. Although this pattern reinforces the causal interpretation, the presence of pre-treatment dynamics raises the question of whether post-treatment movements might also reflect underlying non-treatment trends.

Following Rambachan and Roth (2023), we evaluate this concern by computing the bias multiplier $\lambda^\star$ required to attribute the estimated post-treatment effects entirely to differential trends rather than to conflict. The largest pre-treatment coefficient is -6.8%, while the treatment effect ten years after onset is -14%.[18] Setting the true treatment effect to zero would therefore require a post-treatment, non-treatment trend more than twice as large (in absolute value) as the strongest pre-treatment trend we observe. Such a reversal is implausible, indicating that the estimated effects are robust to violations of parallel

[17] The decline in democracy is not driven by the contraction in GDP documented by Benmelech and Monteiro (2025b). In Online Appendix Figure B.1, we re-estimate the event study including the logarithm of real GDP as a control. The treatment effects are unchanged.

[18] Formally, for each post-treatment period $\tau \geq 0$ we compute $\lambda^\star_\tau = \hat{\gamma}_\tau / B$, where B is a reference pre-treatment coefficient. We consider three choices: (i) $B = \hat{\gamma}_{-2}$, (ii) the average of all pre-treatment coefficients, and (iii) the minimum pre-treatment coefficient. Online Appendix Figure B.2 reports the resulting $\lambda^\star_\tau$. Across most periods and reference levels, $\lambda^\star_\tau > 1$, indicating that eliminating the estimated treatment effects would require not only reversing the pre-treatment trend but doing so at a magnitude that exceeds anything observed in the data.

trends.[19]

As a complementary test, we exclude observations with unusually steep pre-treatment trends. For each conflict–country pair, we estimate a linear trend in the democracy index using only the five pre-treatment years. We then re-estimate equation (2) after removing all pairs with pre-treatment slopes below the 5th percentile or above the 95th percentile.[20] The results, shown in Figure VI, eliminate all pre-treatment dynamics: the pre-treatment coefficients become statistically indistinguishable from zero, while the post-treatment coefficients remain unchanged.[21]

Taken together, these exercises show that differential pre-treatment trends do not contaminate the estimated post-treatment effects. There is no systematic relationship between pre-treatment slopes and post-treatment dynamics, and the evidence strongly suggests that our main results are not driven by violations of parallel trends.

Our results imply a marked deterioration in democratic institutions for treated countries relative to controls. Ten years after the onset of conflict, democracy in treated countries is 13% lower than in control countries. To place this magnitude in context, Online Appendix Figure B.5 plots the distribution of ten-year changes in the democracy index. The treatment effect lies at the 14th percentile of this distribution, meaning that 86% of all observed ten-year changes are larger in value than the change we document. Moreover, the average ten-year change is a 16% *increase* in democracy, underscoring that our estimated effect represents a sharp reversal of the typical trajectory. In other words, the typical country becomes more democratic over a decade, while treated countries move sharply in the opposite direction (relative to control countries). In terms of magnitude, the absolute value of the treatment effect corresponds to the median absolute change over any ten-year window, highlighting that conflict induces a shift in democratic institutions that is both statistically and substantively large.

Our findings are also robust to alternative measures of the quality of democratic institutions. Online Appendix Figure B.6 shows that conflict generates marked and persistent declines across all five core V–Dem dimensions—electoral, liberal, egalitarian, participatory, and deliberative democracy. In addition, Figure VII documents a sharp and long-

[19] A related concern is that medium-run political cycles could generate movements in democracy that happen to coincide with the onset of conflict. To evaluate this possibility, we re-estimate the event study after shifting the onset of conflict five years earlier. The placebo results, presented in Online Appendix Figure B.3, show coefficients indistinguishable from zero, inconsistent with democracy cycles driving our findings.

[20] The baseline sample we use for the results in Figure V has 167,061 observations. We exclude 12,213 observations, or 7% of the sample.

[21] In Online Appendix Figure B.4, we further estimate the event study separately for conflict–country pairs with below-median pre-treatment slopes and for those with above-median slopes. Both samples yield nearly identical post-treatment profiles.

lasting rise in political corruption following conflict. A decade after the onset of conflict, political corruption increased by 9% for treated countries relative to control countries. This finding is in line with a large body of empirical literature that documents a negative correlation between democratic quality and political corruption. High-quality democracies consistently sustain lower levels of political corruption (Treisman, 2000) Moreover, corruption declines as democratic institutions consolidate and rises when they weaken (Rock, 2009)

Finally, the results are not an artifact of our sample restrictions. In Online Appendix Figure B.7, we re-estimate equation (2) while relaxing the requirement that control countries remain conflict-free and that treated countries experience no overlapping conflicts. The estimated effects remain large and persistent. We also estimate the event study after excluding top-tier democracies and deep autocracies—countries whose pre-onset democracy index lies in the far left or right tails. As shown in Online Appendix Figure B.8, the results are unchanged: conflict continues to exert a sizable and enduring negative effect on democratic institutions.

III.C How Does Democracy Decline?

We have shown that democracy declines sharply following the onset of conflict. We now examine the channels through which this deterioration occurs. To do so, we estimate equation (2) using four outcomes: (1) an index of media censorship (where a decline indicates greater censorship), (2) an index of judicial purges (where a decline indicates more purges), (3) the logarithm of an index measuring the extent to which the military serves as a base of support for the executive, and (4) the logarithm of an index for freedom of association.[22] The results are shown in Figure VIII.

Conflict leads to a large and persistent increase in media censorship.[23] Ten years after onset, the censorship index in treated countries is 0.3 lower than in control countries. This effect is economically meaningful: in the distribution of ten-year changes in censorship from 1948 to 2023, the estimated decline lies at the 21st percentile, meaning that only one-fifth of all decade-long changes exhibit a sharper rise in censorship. Judicial independence erodes along similar lines. Judicial purges increase substantially after conflict begins, with treated countries experiencing a 0.2 decline relative to controls ten years after onset.[24] This magnitude is also large—only 21% of all ten-year changes in the purge

[22]Specifically, we use v2mecenefm, v2jupurge, v2x_ex_military, and v2x_frassoc_thick. The first two range from -4 to 4, while the latter two range from 0 to 1.

[23]A decline in the index denotes an increase in media censorship on the part of the State.

[24]A decline in the index denotes an increase in judicial purges

index are more negative.

Conflict also restricts core liberal freedoms. Freedom of association falls markedly: ten years after the onset of conflict, treated countries exhibit levels roughly 20% lower than those in control countries. Restrictions on freedom of movement rise as well (Online Appendix Figure B.9). These patterns indicate that conflict weakens not only electoral and executive constraints but also the civil liberties required for pluralistic political activity.

Conflict further increases the executive's reliance on the military as a base of political authority. On impact, the index of military support rises by 12%, placing the estimate at the 9th percentile of the distribution of year-to-year changes—an unusually sharp shift. The effect diminishes gradually and becomes statistically insignificant only after eight years, suggesting that reliance on the military rises persistently but is measured with noise. This pattern aligns with the documented increase in military expenditures following the onset of conflict (Benmelech and Monteiro, 2025b). Online Appendix Figure B.10 shows a clear jump in defense spending as a share of GDP.

Conflict also reshapes political turnover. Using the Archigos data, we classify each leader's entry and exit as regular or irregular. Irregular transitions are triggered by foreign intervention, military action, mass protest, assassination, or other extra-legal mechanisms. We estimate equation (2) using indicators for irregular entry and irregular exit, with results shown in Figure IX.

Conflict triggers a sharp spike in irregular leadership change. In the year conflict begins, the likelihood of an irregular entry rises by 10 percentage points—a threefold increase relative to the unconditional pre-conflict probability of 3.8%. Irregular exits also spike: the probability rises by 7 percentage points, more than doubling the unconditional likelihood of 3.3%. Thus, conflict raises the risk of extra-legal removal of incumbents, but it raises even more sharply the likelihood that successors arrive through extra-legal means.

In addition, the timing and asymmetry of irregular leadership transitions are informative. Conflict is associated with an increase in irregular entry at the onset of conflict, but we find no evidence of subsequent extra-legal removal of the new leader. This pattern suggests that conflict alters the rules of political succession. Once power changes hands through extra-legal means, the new leadership appears able to stabilize its position, plausibly because institutional constraints have weakened and the scope for repression has expanded. Irregular entry thus represents a one-time breach of democratic norms with persistent institutional consequences.

More broadly, even temporary departures from constitutional rules can have lasting effects. Democratic institutions rely on shared expectations about the legitimacy and en-

forceability of formal procedures. When leaders enter office through coups or other extra-legal mechanisms, these expectations are disrupted, weakening the credibility of constitutional constraints and increasing tolerance for coercive political strategies. In this sense, leadership instability during conflict is not merely consistent with democratic backsliding but may actively contribute to it by reinforcing executive discretion and weakening opposition oversight.

Finally, we examine disruptions to the constitutional order. We estimate equation (2) using as the outcome variable an indicator variable that takes the value of one if the constitution is suspended in that year, and zero if otherwise. The results are presented in Figure X.

Mirroring the patterns for irregular leadership change, the onset of conflict is associated with a pronounced rise in constitutional suspension. In the year conflict begins, treated countries are 16 percentage points more likely to suspend their constitution than control countries—a threefold increase relative to the unconditional probability of 5%.

Taken together, these results reveal a consistent pattern. Conflict weakens the institutional foundations of democracy across multiple dimensions: censorship increases, judicial independence erodes, civil liberties contract, military influence rises, leaders enter and exit through extra-legal means, and constitutions are suspended. The decline of democracy is driven not by a single mechanism but by a broad and coordinated unraveling of institutional checks and civic freedoms. Conflict does not merely slow democratic development—it shifts countries onto a fundamentally different institutional trajectory.

IV. Democratic Backsliding Across Conflicts

Having established the average effect of conflict on democratic institutions, we now ask whether this effect varies across different types of conflicts. Conflicts differ widely in their origins, structure, and political environments, and these differences may condition the extent to which they erode democratic governance. In this section, we decompose the effects of conflict along several dimensions—prior exposure, conflict type, and war outcome—to identify the settings in which democratic backsliding is most pronounced.

IV.A First-Time Conflicts Versus Recurrent Conflicts

We begin by examining whether the institutional consequences of conflict depend on a country's prior exposure to war. The first conflict a country experiences may trigger the initial breakdown of democratic checks, whereas subsequent conflicts may unfold in an

institutional environment already reshaped by earlier episodes. For each conflict c and treated country i, we therefore count the number of earlier conflicts in which i participated.[25] We classify conflict c as a *first-time conflict* if it is the first conflict ever experienced by *all* participating countries.[26] All other episodes are classified as *recurrent* conflicts. This decomposition allows us to test whether democratic backsliding is primarily a first-time phenomenon or whether institutional deterioration accumulates over repeated conflicts. Figure XI presents the results.

First-time conflicts lead to a large and persistent decline in democracy. A decade after onset, countries experiencing their first conflict exhibit democracy levels roughly 30% lower than those of control countries—twice the magnitude of the average effect documented earlier. By contrast, we find no evidence that recurrent conflicts generate meaningful declines in democracy. Countries with prior conflict exposure display no statistically or economically significant deterioration in democratic institutions following the onset of a new conflict. This pattern is intuitive: autocracies and previously conflict-exposed countries already operate with limited democratic checks, leaving little institutional margin left to erode.

A natural interpretation of these results is that the institutional consequences of conflict are strongly front-loaded. A first conflict exposes vulnerabilities that remain latent in peacetime, generating pressure for executive centralization and creating the legal and administrative precedents that permit governments to invoke emergency powers (Berrebi and Klor, 2008; Acemoglu, Vindigni and Ticchi, 2010b). These changes tend to be irreversible: once the security apparatus expands, opposition parties weaken, and wartime narratives legitimize extraordinary measures, democratic checks rarely recover. Subsequent conflicts occur in systems that have already adapted to—or fully internalized—the logic of wartime governance. Much of the institutional damage has already occurred, so additional conflicts deliver only modest marginal effects. This interpretation is consistent with broader work on the persistence of political institutions and the accumulation of state power under conditions of violence (e.g., Besley and Persson, 2011).

We next examine additional sources of heterogeneity. Online Appendix Figure C.1 shows no evidence that the decline in democracy differs between short and long conflicts. Similarly, Online Appendix Figure C.2 indicates that high-intensity conflicts—those with more than 1,000 casualties—do not generate larger declines in democracy than lower-

[25] We use all conflicts in the original UCDP/PRIO dataset to construct this measure, not only those in our estimation sample.

[26] We define this measure at the conflict level to avoid splitting a single conflict across subsamples. Defining exposure at the country level would produce episodes in which some participants are first-timers while others are not.

intensity conflicts. Thus, neither the length nor the intensity of conflict explains the institutional deterioration documented in our baseline results.

By contrast, pre-conflict political institutions play a central role. Online Appendix Figure C.3 shows that only conflicts involving countries that were democratic before onset exhibit large and persistent declines in democracy. Conflicts involving autocracies generate no meaningful change in political institutions, consistent with Collier and Rohner (2008). We extend this result by showing that the effect is sharply concentrated among *low-capacity democracies*. As shown in Online Appendix Figure C.4, only countries with low levels of state capacity—measured using the share of government expenditure in GDP, a standard cross-country proxy—experience significant democratic backsliding after conflict. This underscores the central role of state capacity in shaping how political institutions respond to war.

Overall, the patterns suggest that the institutional damage of conflict is highly selective: it is first conflicts, fought by low-capacity democracies, that trigger enduring democratic decline, rather than the length or intensity of war itself.

IV.B Interstate Conflicts Versus Intrastate Conflicts

A natural source of heterogeneity is the distinction between interstate and intrastate conflicts. These forms of war differ sharply in their political dynamics: interstate wars mobilize national coalitions against external threats, while intrastate wars pit governments against domestic challengers and often involve questions of territorial control, minority rights, and elite survival. Prior work—including Benmelech and Monteiro (2025b) and the broader literature on internal conflict (e.g., Blattman and Miguel, 2010)—shows that these differences translate into distinct economic and political consequences. This motivates asking whether democratic backsliding is concentrated in one type of conflict or whether both external and internal wars impose similar institutional pressures. Figure XII presents the estimates.

Interstate conflicts do not lead to a decline in democracy relative to control countries. By contrast, intrastate conflicts generate a sharp and persistent deterioration in democratic institutions. Ten years after the onset of intrastate conflict, treated countries exhibit democracy levels roughly 16% lower than those of control countries, with effects that remain nearly unchanged eight years after onset. The absence of backsliding in interstate wars and the pronounced decline in internal wars suggest that domestic political contestation—not the scale of external conflict—drives institutional erosion.

Intrastate conflicts frequently involve internal threats to the governing coalition, which

may increase incentives for repression, strengthen the coercive apparatus, or consolidate power within the ruling elite. These mechanisms are especially salient in societies with deep ethnic or religious cleavages (e.g., Acemoglu, Vindigni and Ticchi, 2010b). To explore whether institutional fragility is concentrated in such contexts, we require data on the salience of minority groups. We rely on the ethnic fractionalization (EF) index of Alesina et al. (2003), which captures the probability that two randomly selected individuals belong to different ethnic groups:

$$\text{EF} = 1 - \sum_{g} s_g^2,$$

where s_g denotes the population share of group g. Higher values indicate a more heterogeneous society.

Because ethnic fractionalization is not time-varying, we classify countries as having high fractionalization if their EF index is above the median. To aggregate this measure to the conflict level, we take the *minimum* classification among all treated countries in the conflict. This ensures that each conflict falls cleanly into a single subgroup and avoids splitting a single conflict across subsamples, which would complicate the construction of the control group and bias comparisons. We then estimate equation (2) for intrastate conflicts, separating high- and low-fractionalization episodes. The results appear in Figure XIII.

We find that the decline in democracy following intrastate conflict is concentrated entirely among conflicts involving highly fractionalized societies.[27] Conflicts in more homogeneous societies exhibit little or no deterioration in democratic institutions. This pattern is consistent with theoretical accounts in which governments facing internal challengers rely on selective repression, elite consolidation, and expanded security powers—responses incompatible with high-quality democratic governance. Internal conflict thus erodes democracy most sharply when ethnic or religious divisions magnify the incentives for exclusion and coercion.

IV.C Winners Versus Losers

A final source of heterogeneity is the distinction between winners and losers. The political aftermath of war depends critically on the outcome: victories can legitimize executive

[27] The result is robust to alternative measures of group salience. Using the indices of ethnic and religious polarization developed by Esteban, Mayoral and Ray (2012) (Online Appendix Figures C.5 and C.6), we again find that only high-polarization intrastate conflicts generate declines in democracy.

expansion and weaken opposition coalitions, while defeats are often associated with leadership turnover, repression, or regime breakdown (e.g., Goemans, 2008; Debs and Goemans, 2010). These mechanisms suggest that the institutional consequences of conflict may differ sharply across winners and losers. To examine this, we classify treated countries according to whether they won or lost each conflict, using the classification provided by the UCDP.[28] Control countries do not participate in the conflict and therefore cannot win or lose; to maintain a comparable counterfactual for each group, we replicate the full set of control observations into both the winner and loser subsamples. This ensures that each treated group is evaluated against the same potential counterfactuals. Figure XIV presents the results.

Countries that lose their conflicts do not experience a decline in democracy relative to control countries. In contrast, countries that win their conflicts exhibit a large and persistent deterioration in democratic institutions. Ten years after the onset of conflict, democracy in winning countries is nearly 40% lower than in the control group, with effects that display little attenuation over time.

This asymmetric pattern is consistent with the mechanisms documented earlier. Victory strengthens the executive's political position, expands the coercive apparatus, and enables leaders to justify extraordinary measures on grounds of national success. Winning also weakens the opposition, which can be portrayed as unpatriotic or obstructive in the postwar settlement (De Mesquita et al., 2005). These dynamics create an environment in which democratic checks erode, censorship rises, and constitutional constraints loosen. By contrast, losing countries often experience leadership turnover or elite reshuffling that resets political constraints, limiting the scope for sustained executive aggrandizement. In short, victory—not defeat—appears to provide the political opportunity structure through which conflict translates into enduring democratic backsliding.

Taken together, these heterogeneity results show that democratic backsliding is not a universal consequence of conflict but one concentrated in specific political environments: first-time conflicts, intrastate wars, victories, and low-capacity democracies. These patterns point to a common underlying mechanism in which internal threats, executive consolidation, and the expansion of coercive power play central roles. In the next section, we examine these mechanisms directly.

[28] In the data, only 35% of conflicts end with a clear victor. A natural concern is that this subsample of conflicts is different from the main sample we use. In Online Appendix Figure C.7 we estimate equation (2) for all conflicts, all conflicts with a victory, and all conflicts without a victory. In all three samples, conflict is associated with a decline in the democracy index for treated countries relative to countries in the control set.

V. Why Does Democracy Decline?

We now turn to the mechanisms that link conflict to democratic backsliding. The heterogeneity patterns documented above suggest that conflict erodes democracy primarily when it reshapes domestic political incentives and the balance of power within the state. In this section, we examine these channels directly, beginning with the hypothesis that the demands of war may make democratic institutions difficult to sustain.

V.A Does Fighting a War Require Autocracy?

A long intellectual tradition, dating at least to Tocqueville (1978, 2000, 2011), argues that democracies may be poorly suited to the demands of war. Mobilization, secrecy, and rapid executive coordination are thought to require a degree of centralized authority that democratic institutions, by design, restrain. Modern work echoes this view: wartime command-and-control may sit uneasily with institutional checks and public oversight (e.g., Reiter and Stam, 2010). Under this perspective, democratic backsliding during conflict could reflect the functional requirements of war-making rather than opportunistic executive behavior. We therefore begin our mechanism analysis by examining whether countries that become more autocratic are more likely to win their conflicts.

To test this hypothesis, we construct a conflict–country dataset in which, for each conflict c and participant country i, we define an indicator equal to one if the country wins and zero if it loses.[29] We estimate the following regression:

$$\text{Wins}_{c,i} = \mu_i + \lambda_{\text{dec}} + \beta_1 \Delta \log \text{Dem}_{c,i} + \beta_2 |\Delta \log \text{Dem}_{c,i}| + \alpha \log \text{Dem}_{c,i,-1} + \varepsilon_{c,i}, \tag{3}$$

where μ_i are country fixed effects and λ_{dec} are decade fixed effects, which absorb slow-moving global changes in military technology, geopolitical structure, or regime composition. We include the lagged democracy index, $\log \text{Dem}_{c,i,-1}$, to account for the possibility that baseline regime type affects both the probability of victory and the extent of institutional change. The term $\Delta \log \text{Dem}_{c,i}$ captures the change in democracy between the onset of conflict and the year the conflict ends, while $|\Delta \log \text{Dem}_{c,i}|$ captures the magnitude of institutional instability, regardless of direction.

If autocracy improves military performance, we would expect $\beta_1 < 0$ (declines in democracy raise the likelihood of victory) or $\beta_2 > 0$ (large shifts, regardless of sign, in-

[29] We restrict attention to conflicts with a clearly identified winner and loser. In our sample, 45% of conflicts satisfy this criterion. Conflicts with and without clear outcomes exhibit similar pre-conflict levels of democracy, state capacity, and conflict duration.

crease the probability of winning). Table II reports the results. We find no evidence that decreases—or increases—in the quality of democratic institutions raise the likelihood of victory.[30] If anything, institutional instability reduces the probability of success: the coefficient on $|\Delta \log \text{Dem}_{c,i}|$ is negative and statistically significant. This is consistent with the idea that political turbulence disrupts mobilization, coordination, and elite cohesion, all of which are central to wartime effectiveness.

To separate increases from decreases in democracy, we estimate:

$$\text{Wins}_{c,i} = \mu_i + \lambda_{\text{dec}} + \beta_1 \Delta \log \text{Dem}^{+}_{c,i} + \beta_2 \Delta \log \text{Dem}^{-}_{c,i} + \alpha \log \text{Dem}_{c,i,-1} + \varepsilon_{c,i}, \tag{4}$$

where $\Delta \log \text{Dem}^{+}_{c,i} = \max\{\Delta \log \text{Dem}_{c,i}, 0\}$ captures increases in democracy and $\Delta \log \text{Dem}^{-}_{c,i} = -\min\{\Delta \log \text{Dem}_{c,i}, 0\}$ captures decreases. Under the hypothesis that autocracy aids wartime performance, we would expect $\beta_2 > 0$. Table III presents the results. Consistent with the earlier estimates, we find no indication that autocratization increases the likelihood of victory. The coefficient on $\Delta \log \text{Dem}^{-}_{c,i}$ is negative—though not statistically significant in our preferred specification—suggesting that declines in democracy, if anything, hinder military success. Increases in democracy are also not positively correlated with winning a war.

Taken together, these results indicate that institutional instability—whether toward greater autocracy or greater democracy—does not improve a country's chances of winning a war. Autocratization does not raise the probability of victory, nor does democratization. Rather than being a functional necessity of war-making, democratic backsliding appears to arise from the political opportunities created by conflict, not from the military requirements of fighting it.

V.B Does Fighting a War Lead to Autocracy?

We now evaluate the broader hypothesis that fighting a war, by its nature, requires executive centralization and therefore pushes countries toward autocracy. If the demands of war-making—mobilization, secrecy, and coercive coordination—make democratic governance difficult to sustain, then democratic backsliding should appear across all conflicts, regardless of duration, context, or outcome. Our evidence does not support this view. Instead, the patterns we document point toward a political-opportunism mechanism rather than a war-requirements mechanism.

[30] The results are robust to replacing $|\Delta \log \text{Dem}|$ with $(\Delta \log \text{Dem})^2$, as shown in Online Appendix Table D.1.

First, the timing of democratic backsliding is inconsistent with the view that autocracy is needed to fight a war. Most conflicts in our sample last only three years, yet democracy continues to decline for eight to ten years after onset, as we show in Figure V. The deterioration unfolds gradually, with little correspondence to the period of greatest military demand. Moreover, democratic backsliding occurs even in *short* conflicts (Online Appendix Figure C.1), where the window for wartime mobilization is narrow and where institutional centralization could not plausibly be justified by prolonged military necessity. If autocracy were functionally required for war-making, its expansion should be immediate and concentrated during conflict; instead, the opposite is true.

Second, institutional decline is restricted to very specific political environments: first-time conflicts, intrastate wars, conflicts involving highly fractionalized societies, and conflicts that governments *win*. These are precisely the settings in which incumbents face domestic challengers or can leverage victory to consolidate authority. In contrast, recurrent conflicts, interstate conflicts, low-fractionalization conflicts, and conflicts that governments *lose* exhibit no systematic decline in democracy. If fighting a war required autocracy, we should observe broad-based institutional deterioration across all these contexts. Instead, backsliding arises only where executives have the greatest political incentives and opportunities to entrench themselves.

Third, the channels through which democracy declines (Figure VIII)—judicial purges, media censorship, restrictions on civil liberties, irregular leadership transitions, and constitutional suspensions—are political in nature, not military. None of these institutional changes improve battlefield performance; instead, they weaken opposition parties, reduce oversight, and expand executive discretion. These mechanisms are consistent with theories of elite consolidation and post-conflict aggrandizement, not with the functional requirements of wartime coordination.

Fourth, becoming more autocratic does not improve military performance. In the previous subsection, we showed that neither decreases nor increases in democracy raise the likelihood of victory. Institutional instability—whether toward autocracy or democracy—if anything lowers the probability of success. This directly contradicts the idea that autocratic shifts are needed to win wars. Governments do not become more likely to prevail by eroding democratic constraints.

Taken together, these findings indicate that conflict does not lead to autocracy because war-making requires centralized authority. Rather, conflict reshapes the domestic political landscape in ways that make autocratization attractive or feasible for incumbents. Backsliding emerges where political incentives align—not where military necessity demands it. Autocratization is therefore not a functional requirement of fighting a war; it is

a response by political leaders to the opportunities that war itself creates. The institutional consequences of conflict are therefore political in origin and persistent in effect.

VI. Conclusion

This paper provides the first global, long-run evidence on how conflict reshapes democratic institutions. We show that war induces a large and persistent decline in democracy: institutions weaken immediately after conflict begins and continue to erode for nearly a decade, far outlasting the conflicts themselves. These declines are not universal. They arise only in a narrow set of political environments - first-time conflicts, intrastate wars, highly fractionalized societies, and conflicts that governments win—and occur through channels such as media censorship, judicial purges, curtailed civil liberties, irregular leadership turnover, and constitutional suspensions.

Our analysis also shows that democratic backsliding does not reflect the functional requirements of war. Autocratization does not improve military performance, and the timing, location, and nature of institutional decline are inconsistent with the idea that democracies must centralize to fight effectively. Instead, conflict creates political opportunities for executives to consolidate authority, weaken constraints, and entrench their power in ways that would be difficult to justify in peacetime.

Taken together, these findings show that conflict does not require autocracy but can make autocratization politically advantageous. Understanding when and why these opportunities arise - and how institutional resilience can be strengthened against them—remains an important task for future research.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

TABLE I
SELECTION INTO CONFLICT

	$h = 1$	$h = 2$	$h = 3$	$h = 4$	$h = 5$
Democracy$_{t-h}$	0.0184	-0.0091	-0.0253	-0.0241	0.0001
	(0.0454)	(0.0456)	(0.0491)	(0.0542)	(0.0545)
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Region-Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	10,323	10,276	10,237	10,221	10,194
R^2 (%)	42	42	42	43	43

Notes. This table shows the results of estimating equation (1), where the outcome variable takes the value of one if the country is in conflict, and zero if otherwise. The regression includes country and region-year fixed effects, as well as a vector of controls which includes the logarithm of real GDP per capita and the logarithm of population. The explanatory variable of interest is the aggregate democracy index $h = 1, \ldots, 5$ before. Standard errors are clustered at the country level. $***$, $**$, and $*$ denote significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% level, respectively.

TABLE II
VICTORY AND CHANGES IN DEMOCRACY

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
$\Delta \log \text{Dem}$	0.230	-0.041	0.066	-0.138	-0.186
	(0.130)	(0.191)	(0.118)	(0.174)	(0.189)
$\lvert\Delta \log \text{Dem}\rvert$	-0.788***	-0.791***	-0.414**	-0.493**	-0.555**
	(0.137)	(0.186)	(0.131)	(0.176)	(0.188)
Sample	Full	Full	Full	Full	Intrastate
Country FE		✓		✓	✓
Decade FE			✓	✓	✓
Observations	274	274	274	274	200

Notes. This table shows the results of estimating equation (3), where the outcome variable takes the value of one if the country wins the conflict, and zero if otherwise. We only consider observations for conflicts in which a victory takes place. We include country and decade fixed effects as well as the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index in the period that precedes the onset of conflict as a control. We consider two explanatory variables: (1) the change in the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index between the onset and the end of the conflict, and (2) the absolute value of this change. $***$, $**$, and $*$ denote significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% level, respectively.

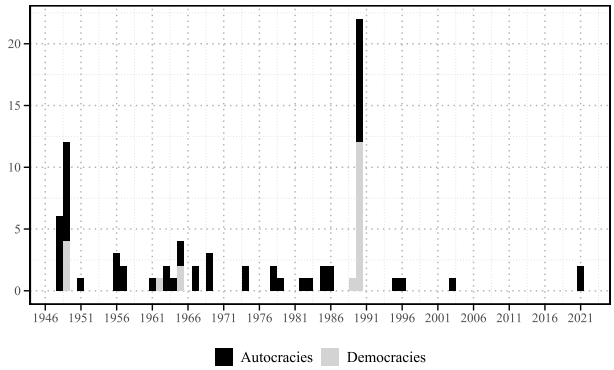
TABLE III
VICTORY AND CHANGES IN DEMOCRACY—INCREASES VERSUS DECREASES

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
$\Delta \log \text{Dem}^{+}$	-0.557**	-0.832***	-0.348*	-0.675**	-0.741**
	(0.188)	(0.230)	(0.173)	(0.209)	(0.229)
$\Delta \log \text{Dem}^{-}$	-1.02***	-0.749*	-0.481**	-0.310	-0.369
	(0.189)	(0.300)	(0.180)	(0.280)	(0.300)
Sample	Full	Full	Full	Full	Intrastate
Country FE		✓		✓	✓
Decade FE			✓	✓	✓
Observations	274	274	274	274	200

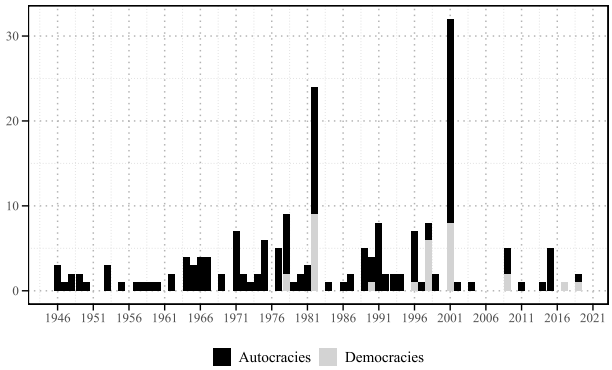
Notes. This table shows the results of estimating equation (4), where the outcome variable takes the value of one if the country wins the conflict, and zero if otherwise. We only consider observations for conflicts in which a victory takes place. We include country and decade fixed effects as well as the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index in the period that precedes the onset of conflict as a control. We consider two explanatory variables: (1) the maximum between the change in the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index between the onset and the end of the conflict and zero, and (2) the negative of the minimum between the change in the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index between the onset and the end of the conflict and zero. $***$, $**$, and $*$ denote significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% level, respectively.

FIGURE I
Number of Countries in Conflict

Panel A. Interstate Conflicts

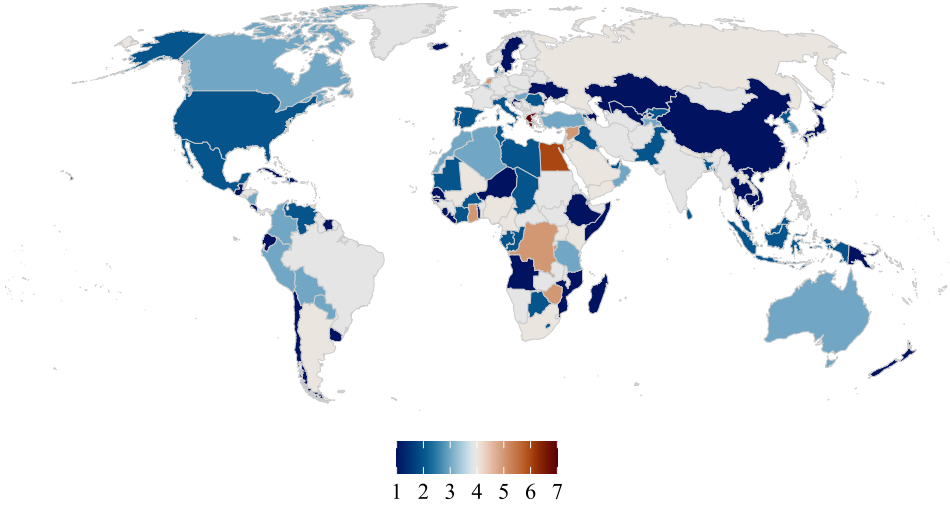


Panel B. Intrastate Conflicts



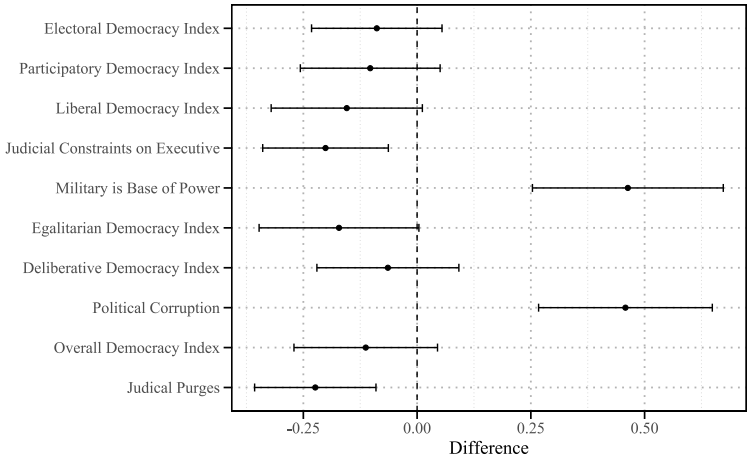
Notes. This figure shows the number of countries in conflict per year, decomposed into democracies and autocracies. For each year, we compute the cross-sectional median of the aggregate democracy index. Countries below the median are classified as autocracies and countries above the median are classified as democracies. In Panel A, we consider only interstate conflicts. In Panel B, we consider only intrastate countries.

FIGURE II
Treated Countries



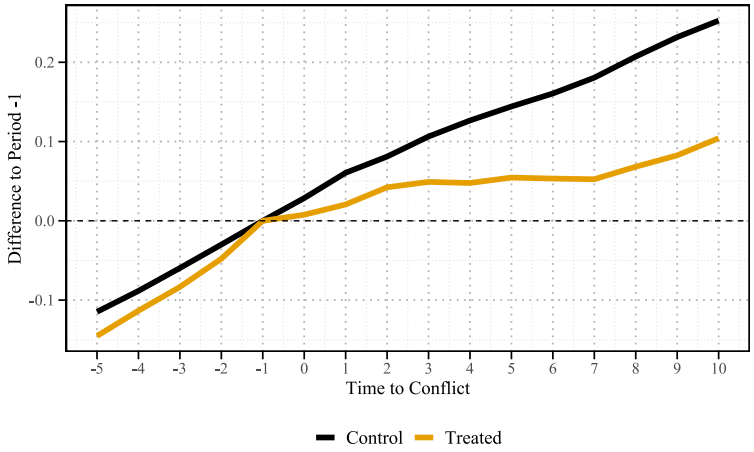
Notes. This figure displays the number of conflicts for each country in our final sample.

FIGURE III
Comparison of Treated and Control Countries



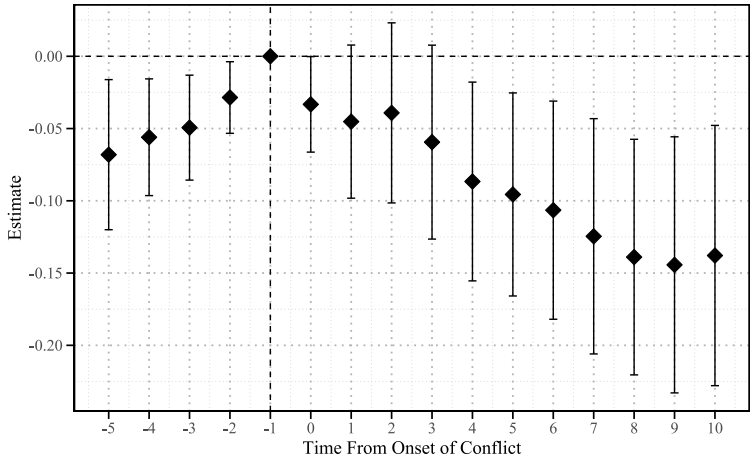
Notes. This figure compares outcomes for treated and control countries. For each outcome, we consider one observation per conflict measured in the period before the onset of conflict. The outcomes are then standardized within conflict - for each conflict, we compute the average and standard deviation across all countries (treated and control) and use these quantities to standardize the outcome variable. We regress the standardized outcome on a treated indicator with conflict fixed effects. Errors are clustered at the conflict level. We present the estimate and 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE IV
Evolution of Aggregate Democracy Index



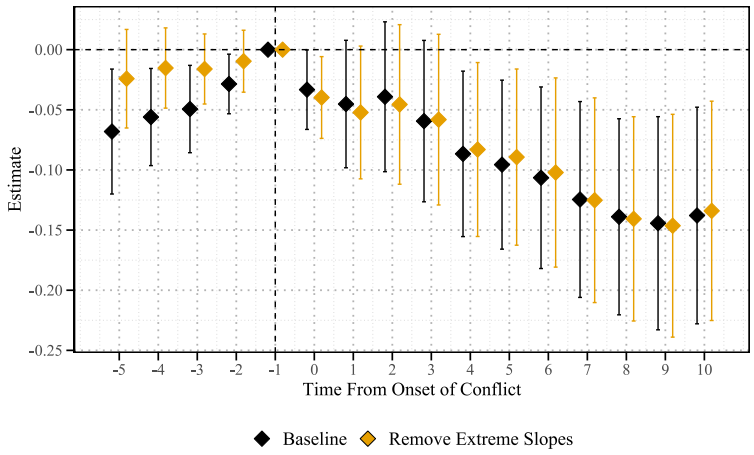
Notes. This figure displays the evolution of the logarithm of the average of the aggregate democracy index for both treated and control countries for each period t relative to the onset of conflict. For each t, we compute the average aggregate democracy index across all conflict-country pairs for both treated and control countries. We then take the logarithm and normalize it by its value in the period that precedes the onset of conflict.

FIGURE V
Effect of Conflict on Democracy



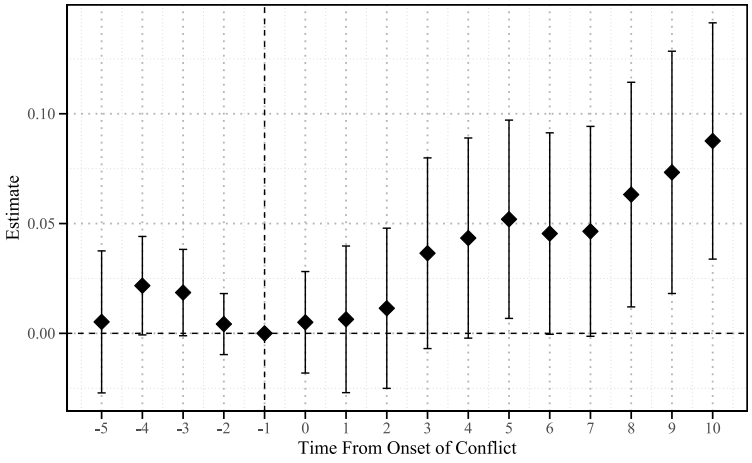
Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2) on a sample with 167,061 observations. The outcome variable is the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE VI
Effect of Conflict on Democracy - Excluding Extreme Slopes



Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2). The outcome variable is the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. For each conflict-country pair, we estimate a linear trend for the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index using only observations in the five years that precede the onset of conflict. We then exclude conflict-country pairs that have slopes that are either above the 95th percentile or below the 5th percentile of the distribution of slopes, which leads to a sample of 154,848 observations (we drop 12,213 observations, or 7% of the total sample). We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

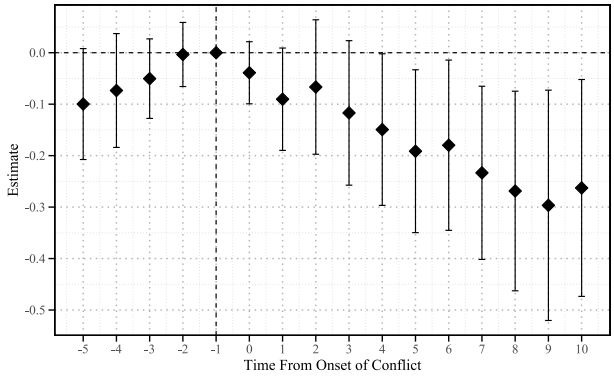
FIGURE VII
Effect of Conflict on Political Corruption



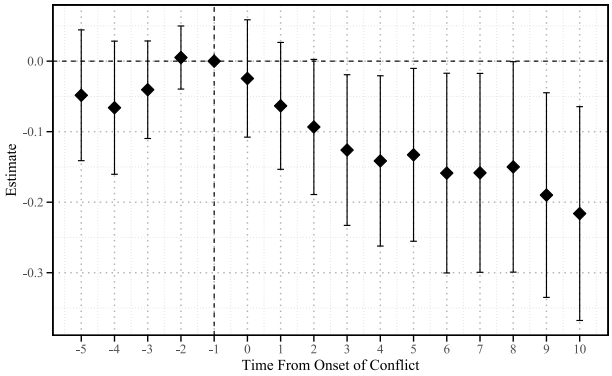
Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2). The outcome variable is the logarithm of the index of political corruption, where a high value implies more corruption. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE VIII
Effect of Conflict on Democracy - Mechanisms

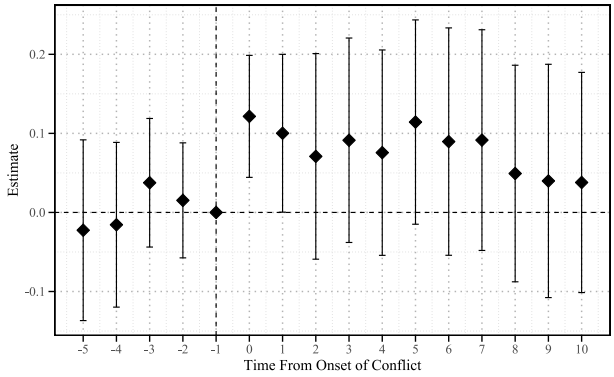
Panel A. Media Censorship



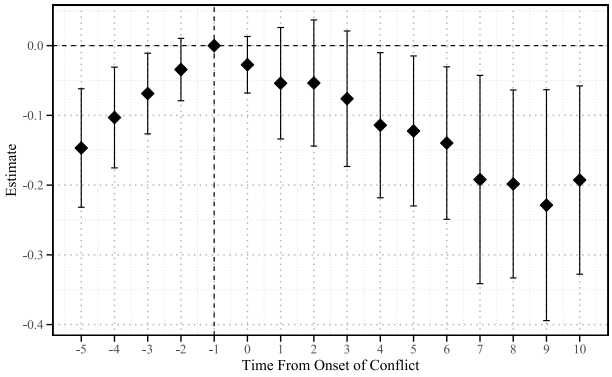
Panel B. Judicial Purges



Panel C. Military as Base of Power



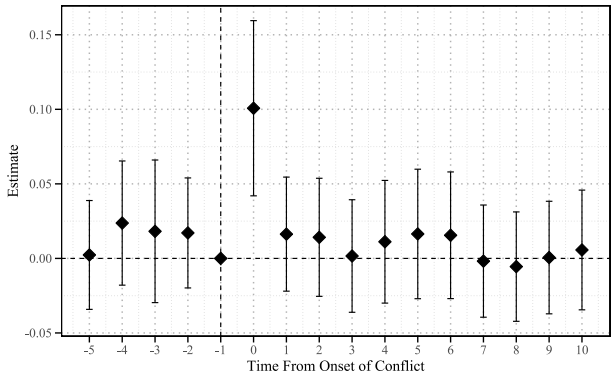
Panel D. Freedom of Association



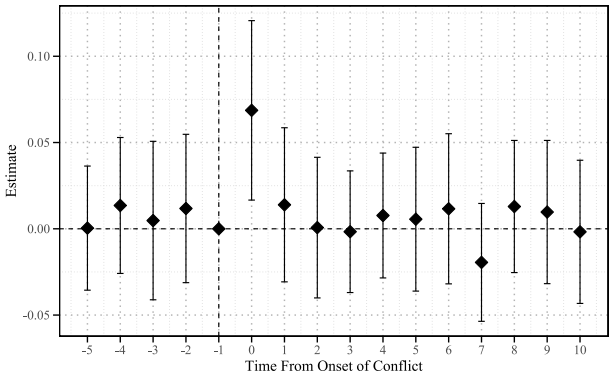
Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2). We consider four outcome variables: (1) media censorship by the government (where a decline implies more censorship), (2) degree of judicial purges (where a decline implies more purges), (3) the logarithm of an index that measures whether or not the military serves as a base of power for the executive branch, and (4) the logarithm of an index that measures freedom of association. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE IX
Effect of Conflict on Leader Turnover

Panel A. Irregular Entry

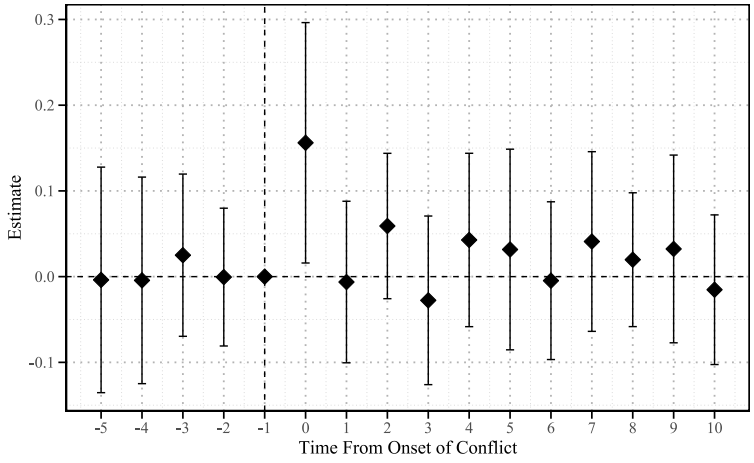


Panel B. Irregular Exit



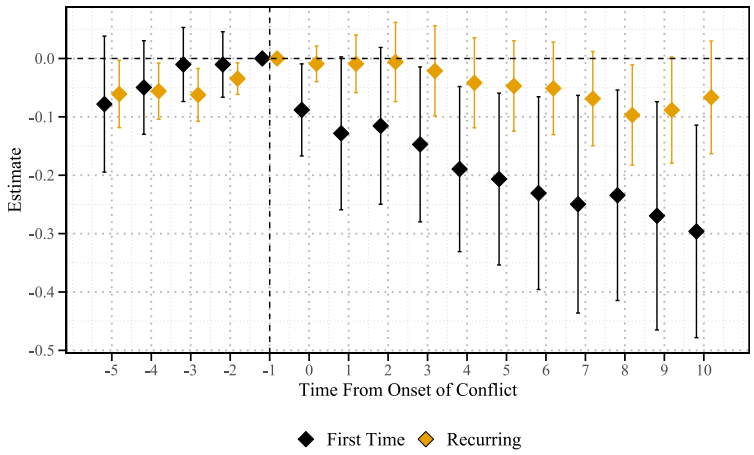
Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2). We consider two outcome variables: (1) an indicator variable that takes the value of one if there is an irregular entry of a leader, and zero if otherwise, and (2) an indicator variable that takes the value of one if there is an irregular exit of a leader, and zero if otherwise. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE X
Effect of Conflict on Constitutional Activity



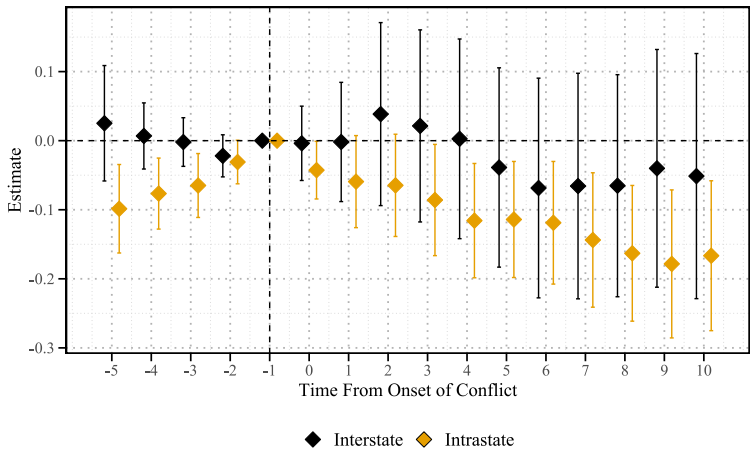
Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2), where the outcome variable is an indicator variable that takes the value of one if the constitution is suspended, and zero if otherwise. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE XI
Effect of Conflict on Democracy - First-Time Versus Recurring Conflicts



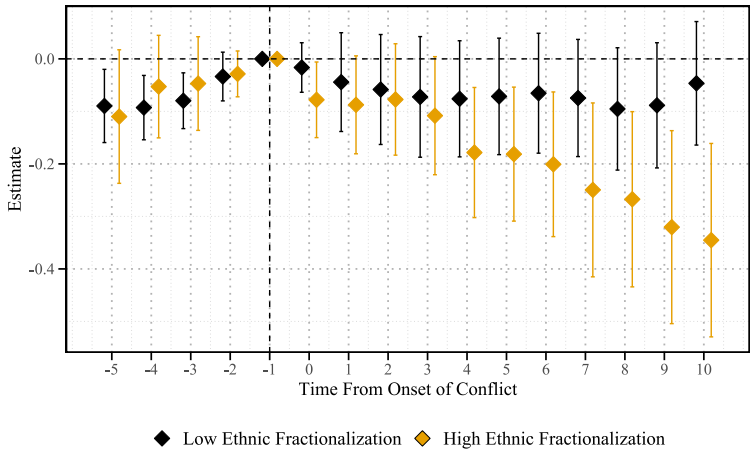
Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2). The outcome variable is the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. For each conflict-treated country pair we compute the number of conflicts that precede this conflict. We classify a conflict as the first conflict if it is the first conflict for all its participants. The remaining conflicts are classified as recurring conflicts. We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE XII
Effect of Conflict on Democracy - Interstate Conflicts Versus Intrastate Conflicts



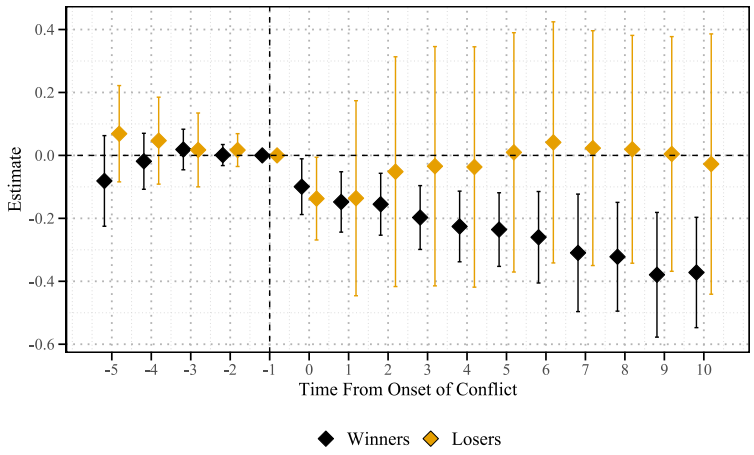
Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2). The outcome variable is the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. We split conflicts into two groups: (1) interstate conflicts (conflicts between states), and (2) intrastate conflicts (conflicts between states and nonstate actors). We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE XIII
Effect of Intrastate Conflict on Democracy - Role of Ethnic Fractionalization



Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2) using only intrastate conflicts. The outcome variable is the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. We split countries into two groups using the measure of ethnic fractionalization developed by Alesina et al. (2003), which is not time-varying and the cross-sectional median. Countries below the median are classified as having low fractionalization, while countries above the median are classified as having high fractionalization. We then classify a conflict as involving low fractionalization countries if at least one country involved has low ethnic fractionalization. Remaining conflicts are classified as high fractionalization. We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE XIV
Effect of Conflict on Democracy - Winners Versus Losers



Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2) using only intrastate conflicts. The outcome variable is the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. We split conflicts into two groups: winners and losers. For each conflict for which we observe a victory, we allocate the winners among treated countries and all the control countries to the subsample of winners (this sample has 59,865 observations). Similarly, we allocate the losers among treated countries and all the control countries to the subsample of losers (this sample has 59,386 observations). We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

Online Appendix

A. Data Appendix

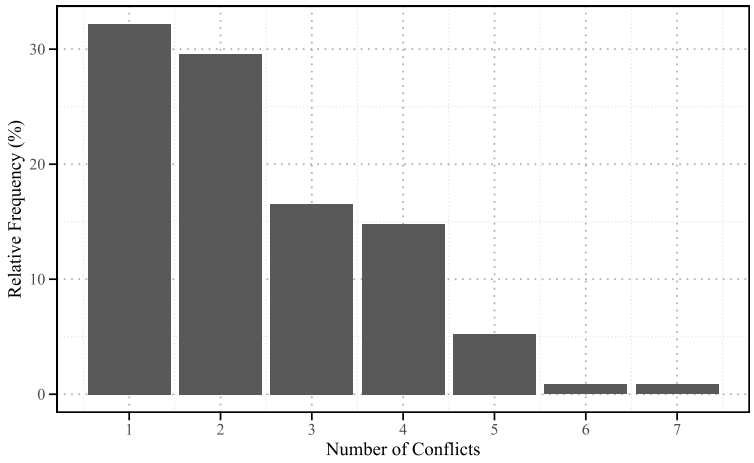
TABLE A.1DEFINITION AND SOURCES OF MAIN VARIABLES

Source	Name	Description
V-Dem	Electoral Democracy	Captures the extent to which a country holds clean, competitive, multiparty elections with universal suffrage and freedom of association. Reflects the institutions that enable citizens to choose leaders. Takes values between 0 and 1, where higher values indicate more democratic processes.
V-Dem	Liberal Democracy	Builds on the electoral democracy index by adding constraints on the executive, judicial independence, individual liberties, and rule of law. Reflects checks and balances and protection from arbitrary state power. Takes values between 0 and 1, where higher values mean stronger liberal protections.
V-Dem	Participatory Democracy	Measures the degree to which citizens engage in political life beyond voting, including civil society participation, local democracy, and mechanisms for citizen influence. Takes values between 0 and 1, where higher values mean deeper citizen participation.
V-Dem	Deliberative Democracy	Evaluates the quality of public reasoning and deliberation in political decision-making: justification of policies, respectful dialogue, and an orientation toward the common good rather than coercion. Takes values between 0 and 1, where higher values imply more deliberative processes.
V-Dem	Egalitarian Democracy	Assesses whether all social groups have equal access to political power and public resources. Covers equal protection, equal participation, and equal distribution of political capabilities. Takes values between 0 and 1, where higher values indicate more equal access.

Source	Name	Description
V-Dem	Average Democracy Index	Simple average of the five main V-Dem democracy indices (electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian). Provides a summary measure of overall democratic quality. Takes values between 0 and 1, where higher values indicate more democratic political institutions and practices.
V-Dem	Government Censorship	Measures the extent to which the government directly or indirectly attempts to censor the print or broadcast media. Takes values between -4 and 4, where a higher value indicates a higher level of censorship
V-Dem	Judicial Purges	Measures the extent to which governments remove, replace, or intimidate members of the judiciary for political reasons. Takes values between -4 and 4, where a higher value indicates a higher intensity of judicial purges.
V-Dem	Military Dimension	Assesses the degree to which the power base of the executive is determined by the military. Takes values between 0 and 1, where a higher value indicates a larger importance of the military in the power base of the executive.
V-Dem	Freedom of association	Captures the extent to which parties are allowed to form and to participate in elections and the extent to which civil society organizations are able to form and to operate freely. Takes values between 0 and 1, where higher values indicate stronger civil society engagement.
V-Dem	Political Corruption	A composite measure of political corruption across the executive, legislature, judiciary, and public sector. Includes bribery, theft of public funds, and abuses of office. Takes values between 0 and 1, where higher values indicate a higher level of corruption.
CCP	Constitutional Amendment	Indicator equal to one in years when a constitutional amendment is adopted. Amendments adjust specific articles or institutional rules without replacing the full constitution.

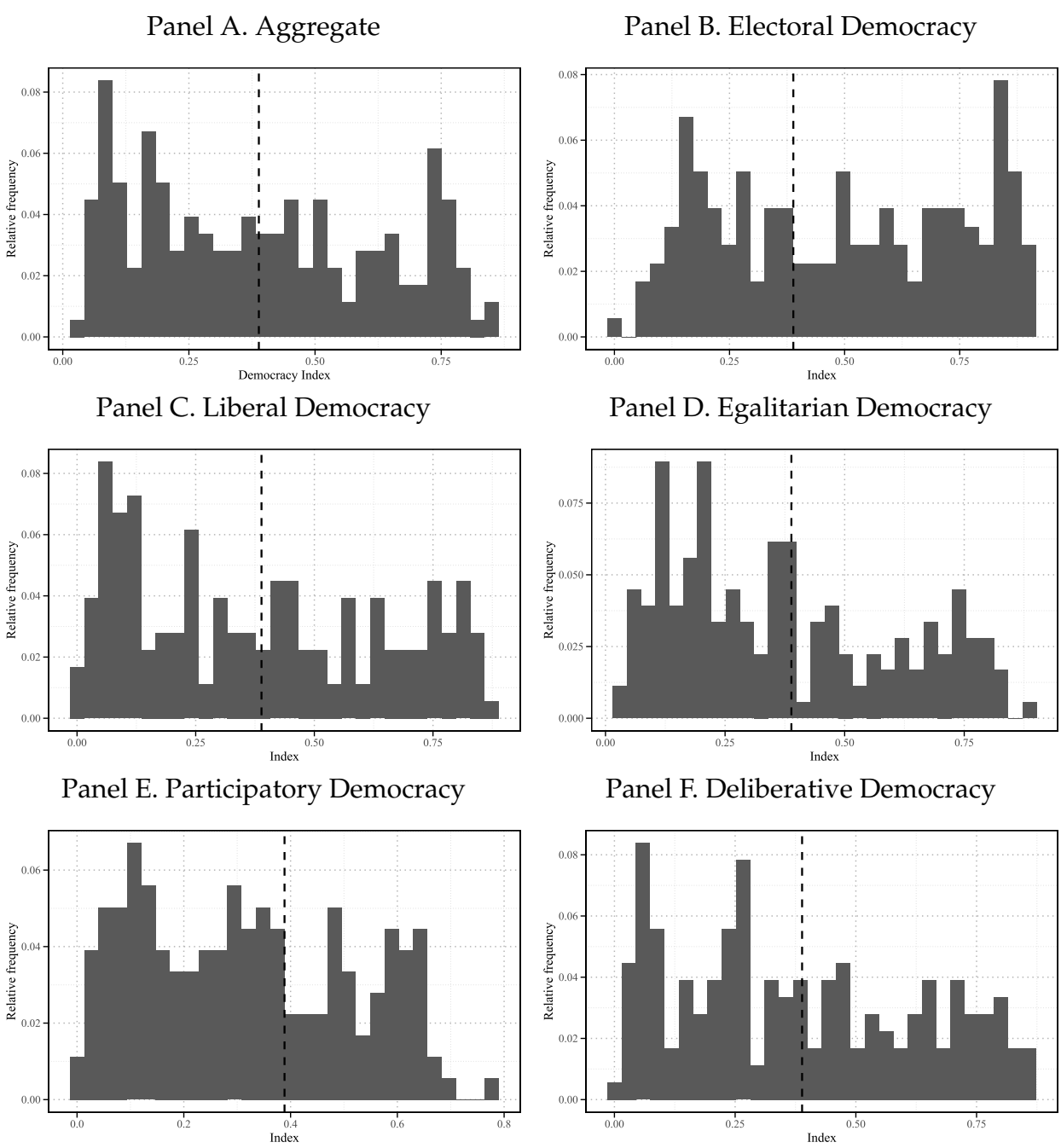
Source	Name	Description
CCP	Constitutional Suspension	Indicator equal to one in years when the constitution is officially suspended or rendered inactive. Suspensions typically occur during coups, states of emergency, or transitional periods.
CCP	New Constitution	Indicator equal to one in years when a new constitution is promulgated, representing a full replacement of the existing constitutional order.
Archigos	Leader Entry	Indicator equal to one in years when a new national leader enters office according to the Archigos coding of political leaders. Entry is based on the official start date of a leader's tenure.
Archigos	Leader Exit	Indicator equal to one in years when a national leader leaves office. Exit follows the Archigos definition of the end of a leader's tenure, whether through resignation, electoral defeat, removal, or death.
Archigos	Irregular Entry	Indicator equal to one in years when a leader comes to power through irregular means, such as coups, unconstitutional appointments, or other non-electoral processes, as classified by Archigos.
Archigos	Irregular Exit	Indicator equal to one in years when a leader leaves office through irregular means, including coups, forced removals, assassinations, or other extra-legal mechanisms, following Archigos coding rules.

FIGURE A.1
Number of Conflicts by Country



Notes. This figure plots the distribution of the number of conflicts (treatments) per country in our sample.

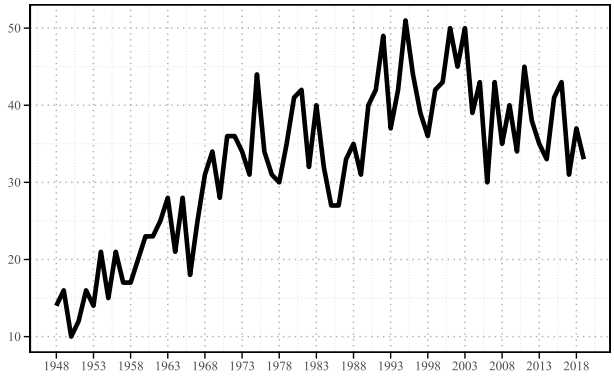
FIGURE A.2
Distribution of Democracy Indices



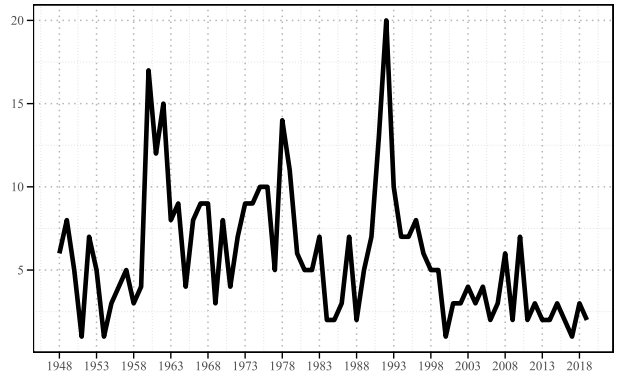
Notes. This figure displays the distributions of different democracy indices for all countries in the world in 2023. The dashed lines represent the cross-sectional average.

FIGURE A.3
Constitutional Activity over Time

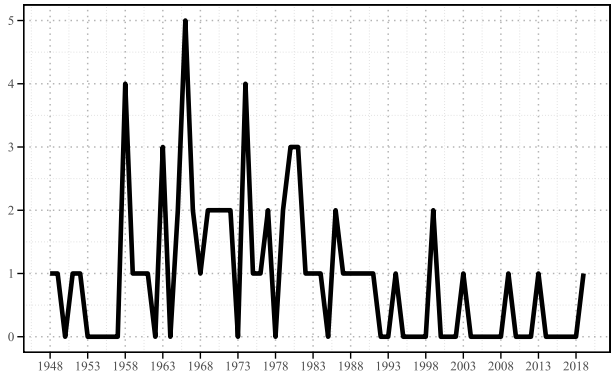
Panel A. Amendments



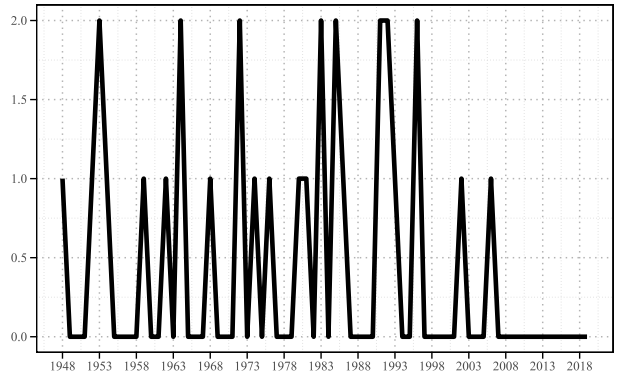
Panel B. New Constitutions



Panel C. Constitutional Suspensions

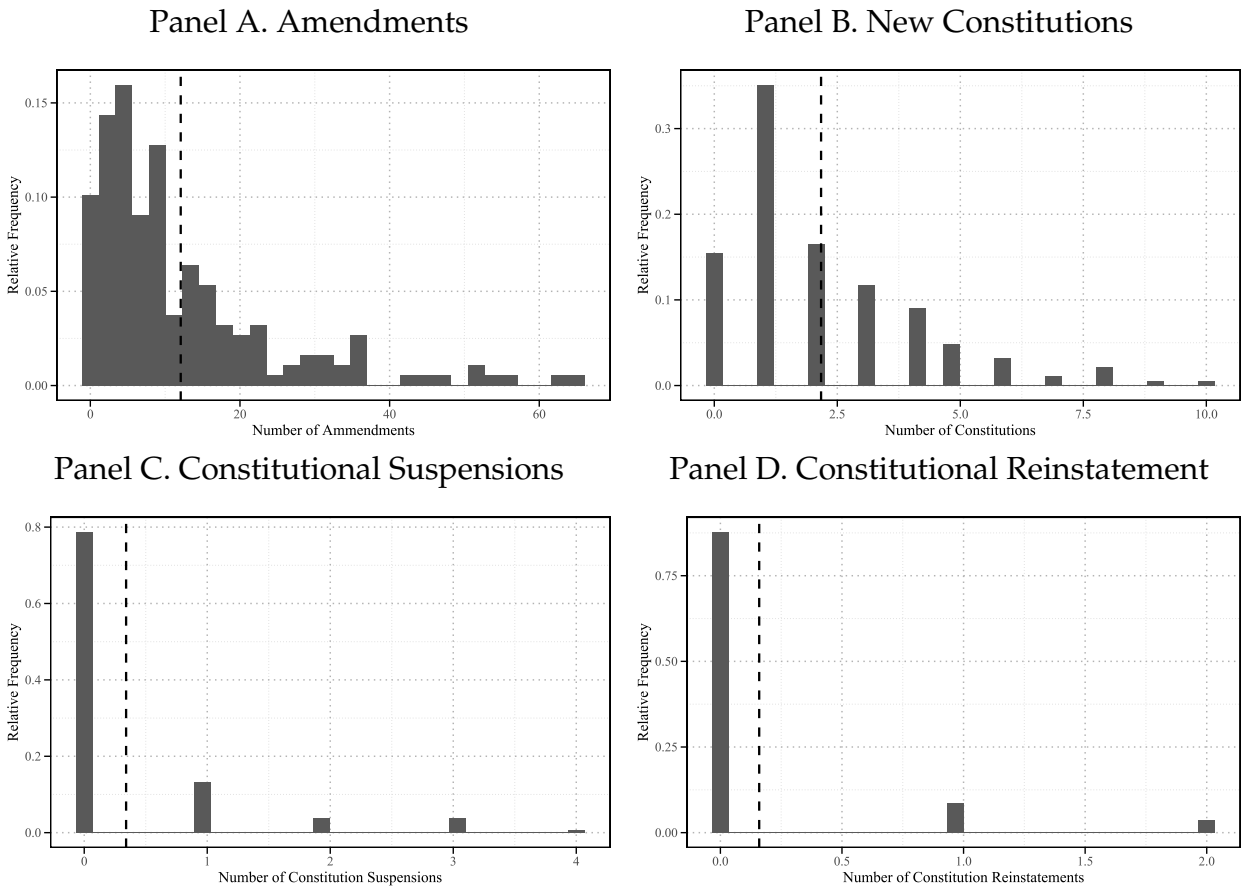


Panel D. Constitutional Reinstatement



Notes. This figure shows indicators for constitutional activity - number of amendments approved, number of new constitutions, number of constitutional suspensions, and number of constitutional reinstatements - over time for all countries in the world. All variables reflect flows.

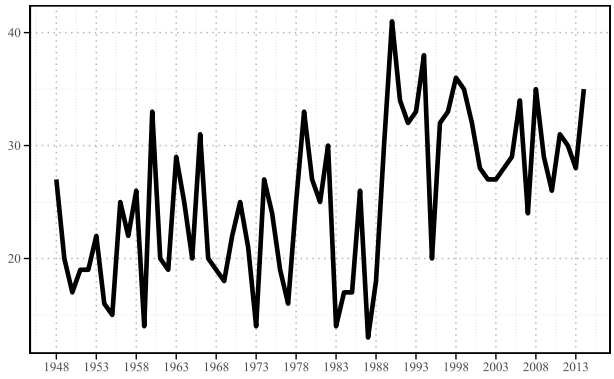
FIGURE A.4
Constitutional Activity Across Countries



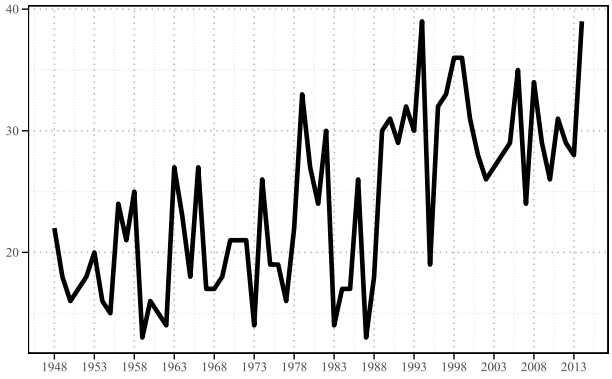
Notes. This figure shows the distribution of constitutional activity for all countries using data between 1948 and 2019. We consider four indicators for constitutional activity - number of amendments approved, number of new constitutions, number of constitutional suspensions, and number of constitutional reinstatements. For each indicator, we plot the distribution of the number of events for each country in the full sample period. The dashed line represents the cross-sectional average.

FIGURE A.5
Leader Turnover

Panel A. Entry



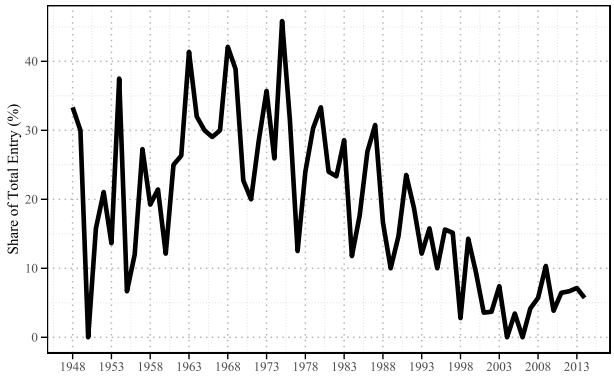
Panel B. Exit



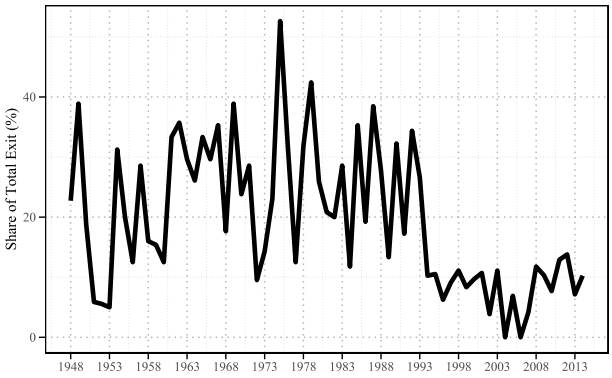
Notes. This figure plots the entry of new effective leaders (in Panel A) and the exit of effective leaders (in Panel B) for all countries in the Archigos dataset between 1948 and 2014.

FIGURE A.6
Irregular Leader Turnover

Panel A. Entry

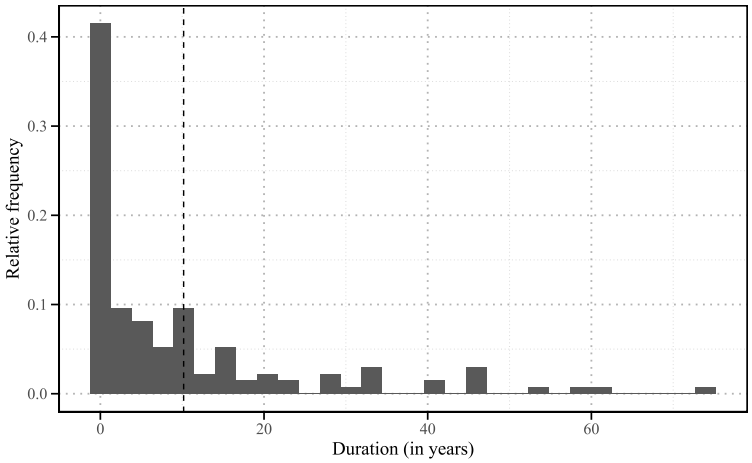


Panel B. Exit



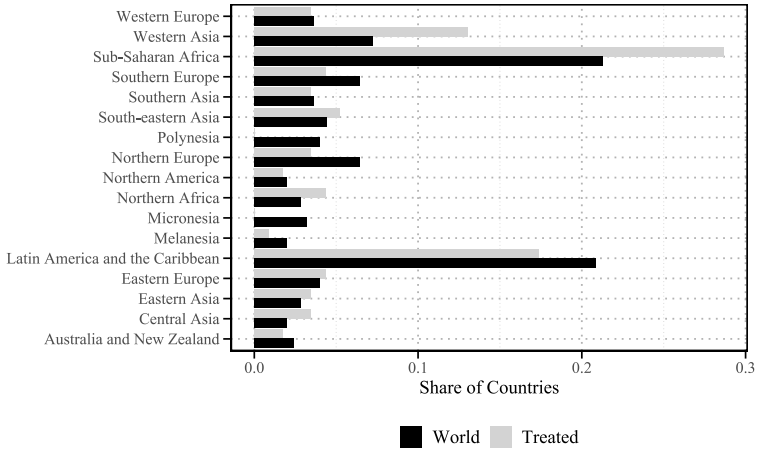
Notes. This figure plots the share of new effective leaders that enter via irregular means (in Panel A) and the exit of effective leaders that takes place via irregular means (in Panel B) for all countries in the Archigos dataset between 1948 and 2014. An irregular entry or exit is one that takes place via a coup, assassination, foreign intervention or any extra-legal means.

FIGURE A.7
Distribution of Conflict Duration



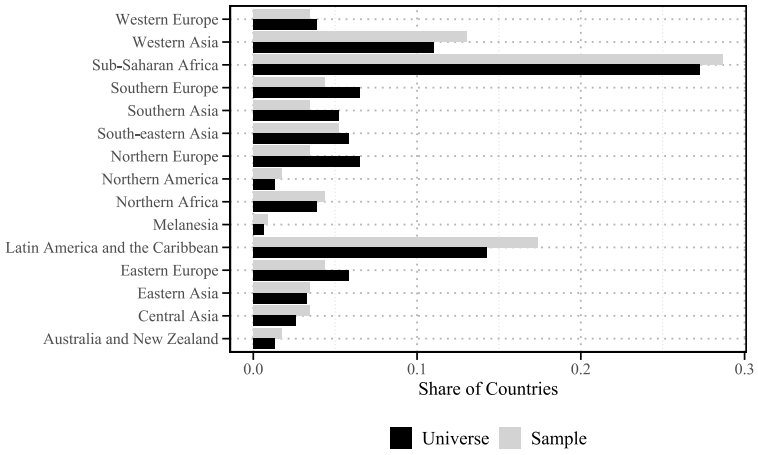
Notes. This figure displays the distribution of conflict duration (in years). The dashed line represents the mean.

FIGURE A.8
Distribution of Number of Countries



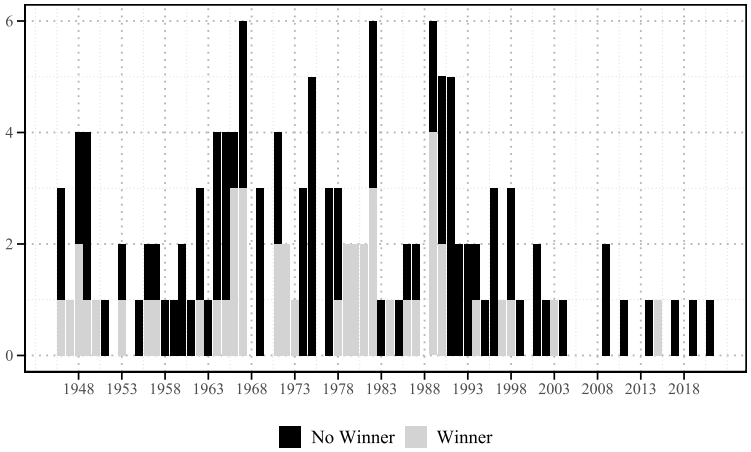
Notes. This figure shows the share of countries allocated to each region. We compute these shares for all countries in the world (”World”) and for all treated countries in our sample (”Treated”).

FIGURE A.9
Distribution of Number of Countries - Comparison with Universe



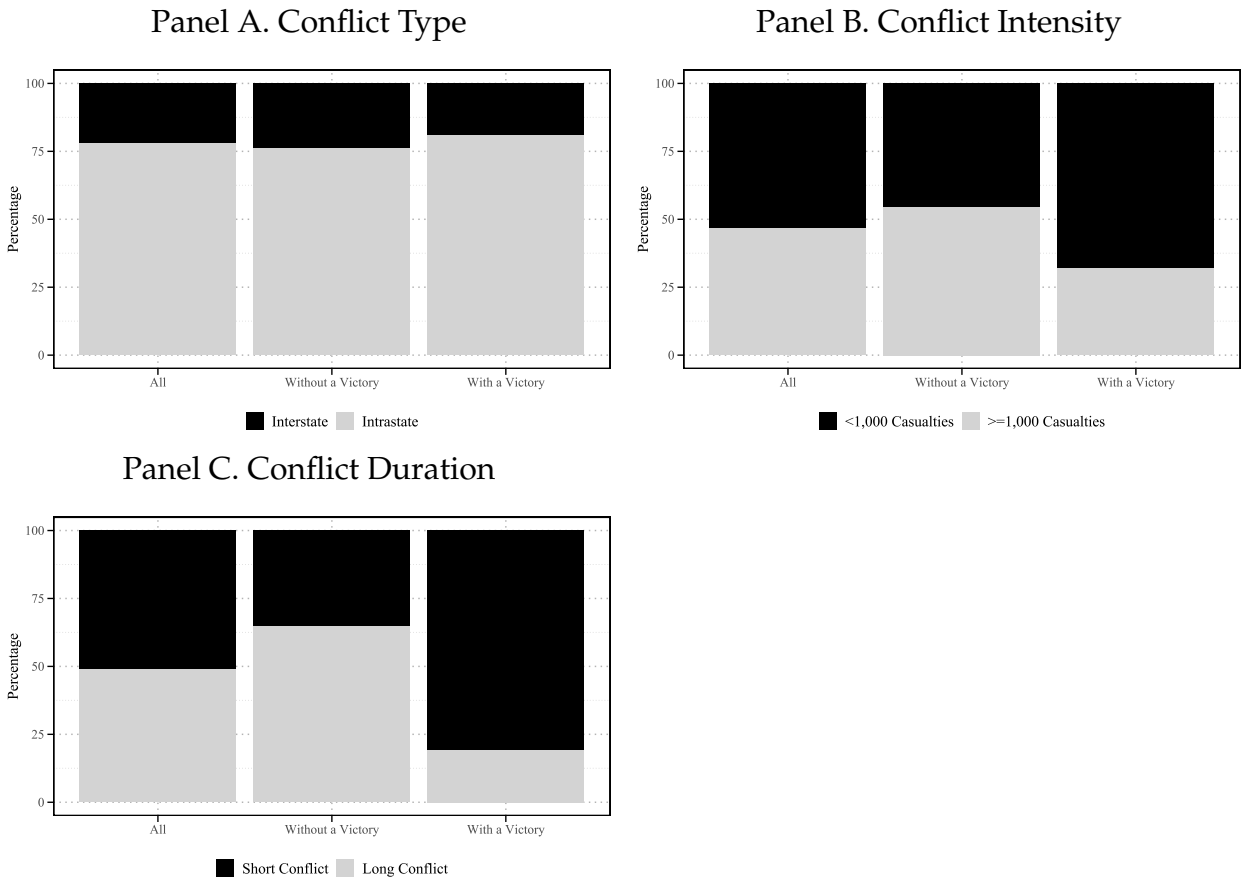
Notes. This figure shows the share of countries allocated to each region. We compute these shares for all countries in the universe of conflicts (″Universe″) and for all treated countries in our sample (″Treated″).

FIGURE A.10
Number of Conflicts over Time - Decomposition by Resolution



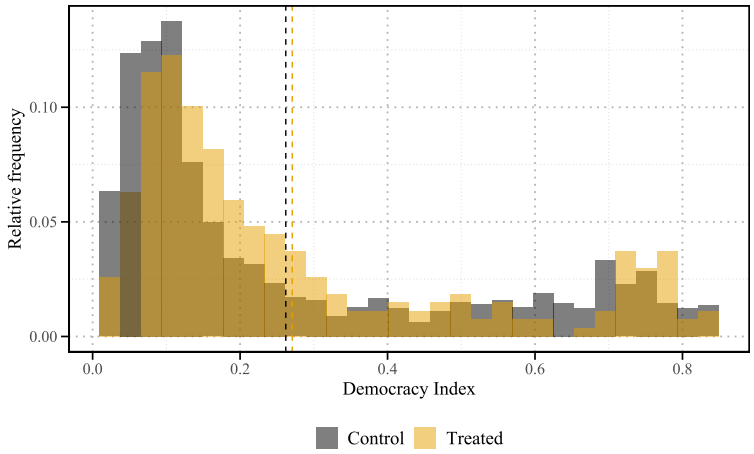
Notes. This figure shows the number of conflicts in our final sample over time. Each conflict is classified as either ″No Winner″ if no victor exists or ″Winner″ if a victor exists.

FIGURE A.11
Decomposition of Number of Conflicts



Notes. This figure shows the decomposition of the number of conflicts in our sample in groups. We present this decomposition for all conflicts ("All"), conflicts without a clear victor ("Without a Victory"), and for conflicts with a clear victor ("With a Victory"). Panel A presents the decomposition into intrastate and interstate conflicts. Panel B presents the decomposition into low-intensity and high-intensity conflicts. Panel C presents the decomposition into short and long conflicts.

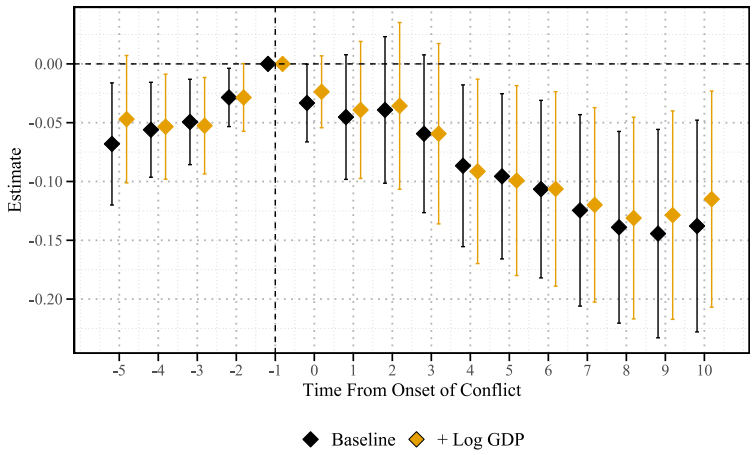
FIGURE A.12
Distribution of Aggregate Democracy Index



Notes. This figure plots the distribution of the aggregate democracy index for all treated and control countries for the period before the onset of conflict. The dashed lines represent the average.

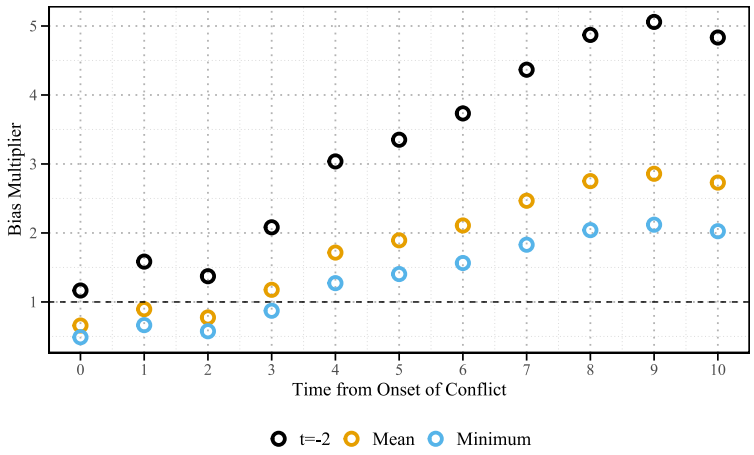
B. Additional Results for Baseline Estimation

FIGURE B.1
Effect of Conflict on Democracy



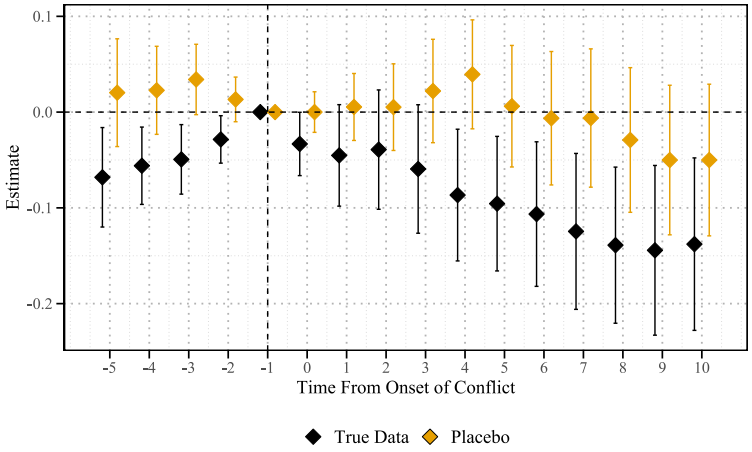
Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2). The outcome variable is the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. We estimate the equation with and without the logarithm of real GDP as a control. We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE B.2
Required Bias Multiplier (λ) to Eliminate the Estimated Treatment Effects



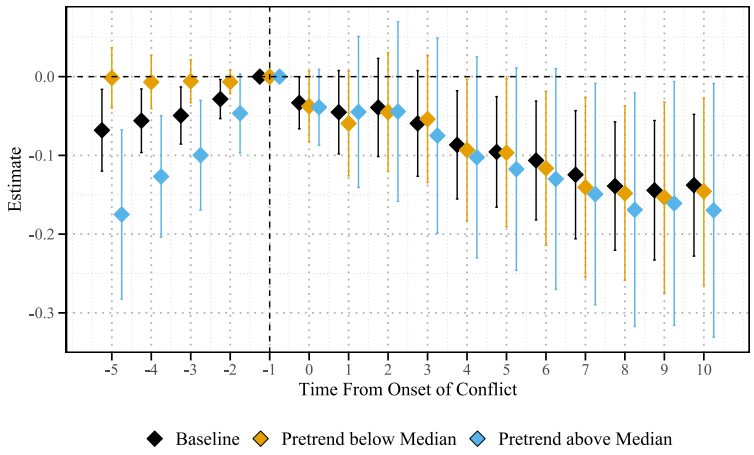
Notes. This figure presents the required bias multipliers that eliminate the estimated treatment effects following Rambachan and Roth (2023). For each period $\tau \geq 0$, we compute $\lambda_\tau = \hat{\gamma}_\tau / B$, where $\hat{\gamma}_\tau$ is the coefficient we estimate in the event study described in equation (2), where the outcome variable is the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index. λ can be interpreted as the strength of a hypothetical post-treatment non-treatment trend that would be required to fully eliminate the estimated treatment effect. B is the pretrend benchmark. We consider three benchmarks: (1) $B = \hat{\gamma}_{-2}$, (2) the average $B = 0.25 \times \sum_{\tau \leq -2} \hat{\gamma}_\tau$, and (3) the minimum $B = \min_{\tau \leq -2} \hat{\gamma}_\tau$.

FIGURE B.3
Effect of Conflict on Democracy



Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2). The outcome variable is the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. We estimate the event study on a dataset in which we have moved the year where the conflict begins five years back. We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

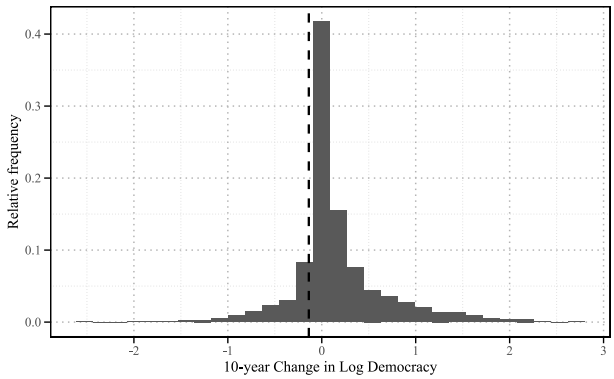
FIGURE B.4
Effect of Conflict on Democracy - Decomposition by Pre-Treatment Slopes



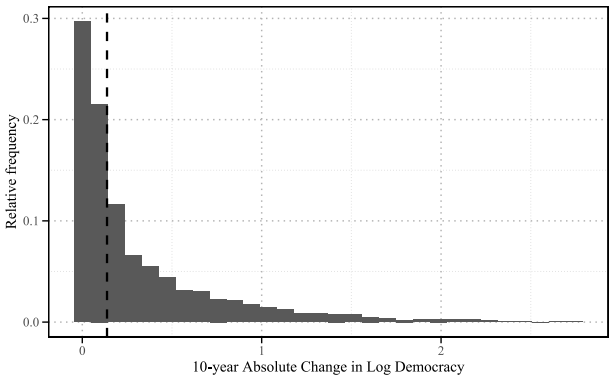
Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2). The outcome variable is the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. For each conflict-country pair, we estimate a linear trend for the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index using only observations in the five years that precede the onset of conflict. We then estimate the event study for three samples: (1) using all observations, (2) using only conflict-country pairs with pre-treatment slopes below the median, and (3) using only conflict-country pairs with pre-treatment slopes above the median. We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE B.5
Distribution of Ten-Year Changes in Democracy

Panel A. Change



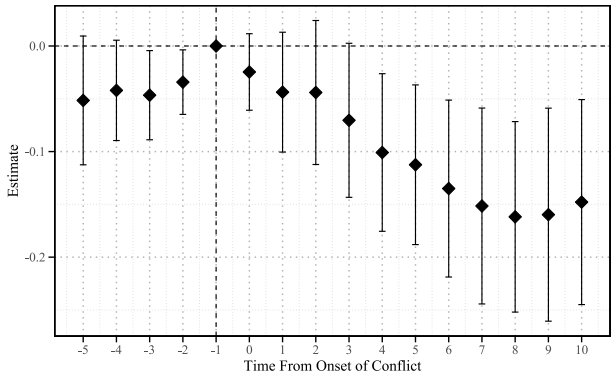
Panel B. Absolute Change



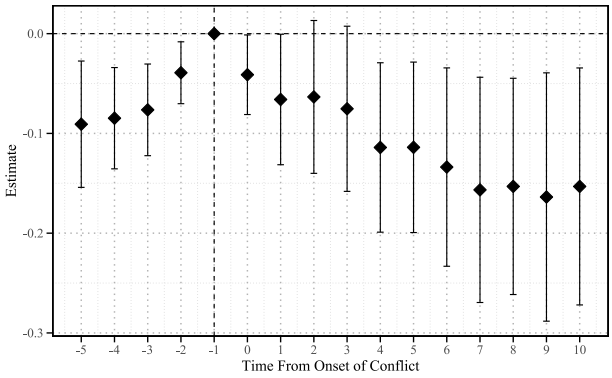
Notes. This figure the distributions of ten-year changes in the logarithm of the aggregate democracy change for all countries in the V-Dem dataset between 1948 and 2023. In Panel A, we present the distribution of these changes. In Panel B, we present the distribution of the absolute value of the change. The dashed line in Panel A is our estimate for the treatment effect ten years after the onset of conflict. The dashed line in Panel B is the absolute value of the treatment effect ten years after the onset of conflict.

FIGURE B.6
Effect of Conflict on Different Measures of Democracy

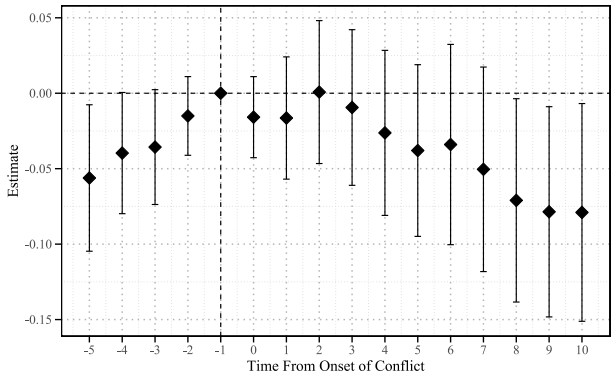
Panel A. Electoral Democracy



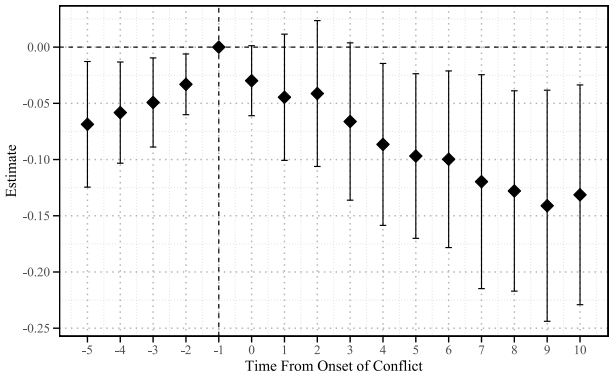
Panel B. Liberal Democracy



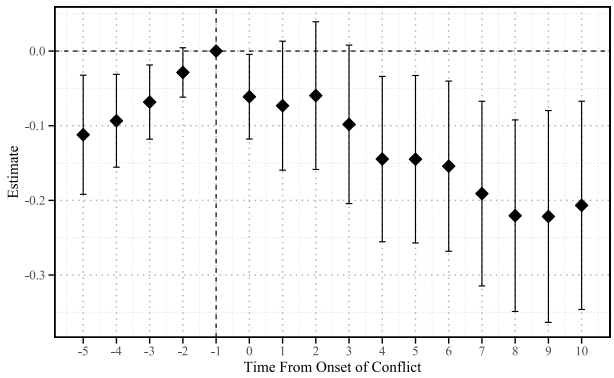
Panel C. Egalitarian Democracy



Panel D. Participatory Democracy

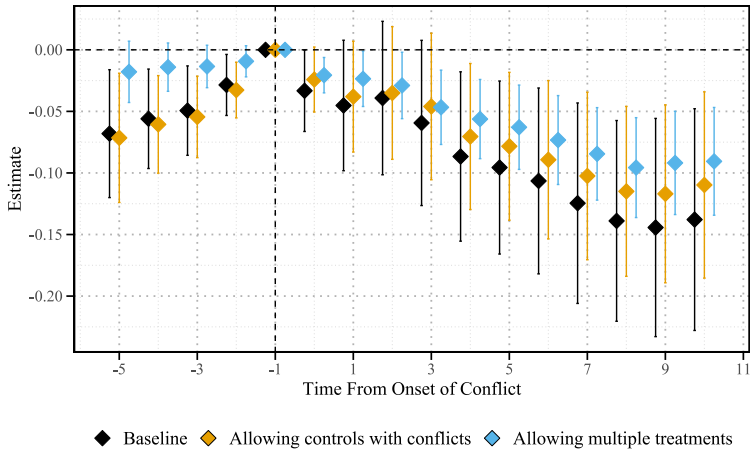


Panel E. Deliberative Democracy



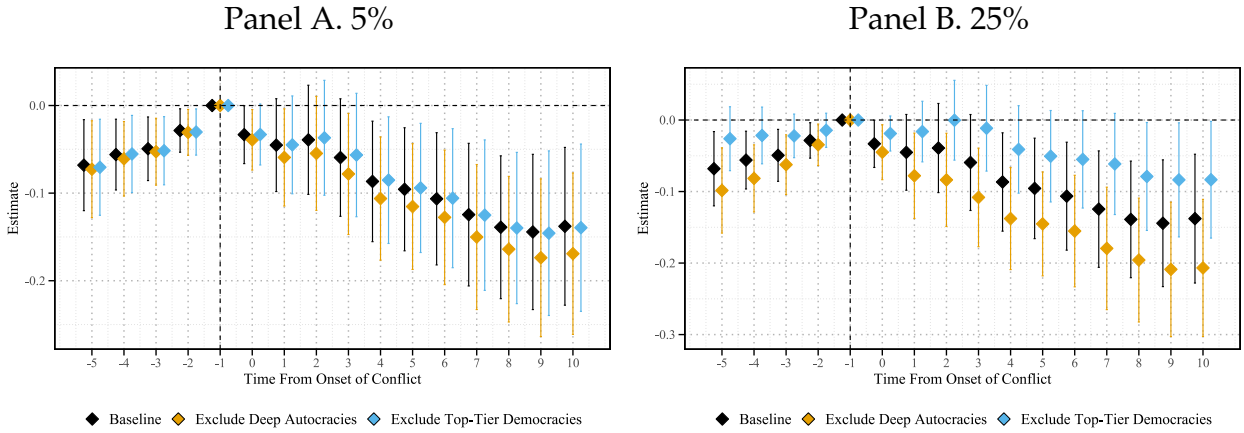
Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2). We consider five outcome variables (all in logs): (1) the electoral democracy index, (2) the liberal democracy index, (3) the egalitarian democracy index, (4) the participatory democracy index, and (5) the deliberative democracy index. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE B.7
Effect of Conflict on Democracy - Relaxing Constraints on Treated and Control Groups



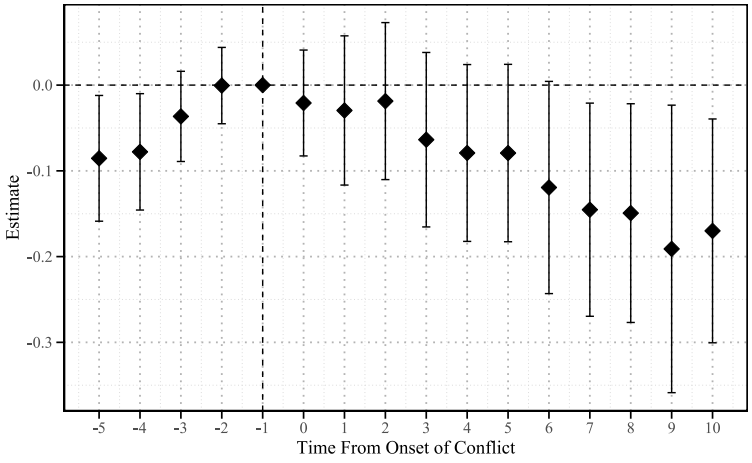
Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2). The outcome variable is the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. We estimate the event study on three samples: (1) our main sample, (2) a sample in which we allow countries in the control group to experience conflicts in the event window, and (3) a sample in which we allow countries in the treatment group to experience an additional conflict in the event window We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE B.8
Effect of Conflict on Democracy - Excluding Extreme Regimes



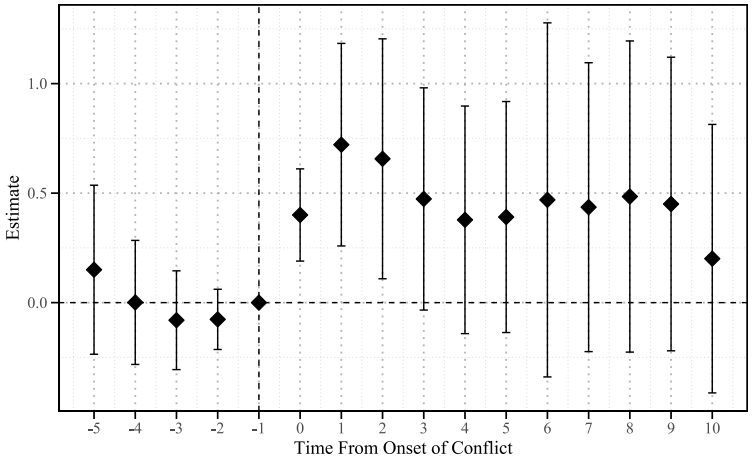
Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2). The outcome variable is the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. For each conflict, and using all countries in the V-Dem dataset, we compute the 5th, 25th, 75th, and 95th percentiles of the distribution of the aggregate democracy index for the period that precedes the onset of conflict. We estimate the event study on three samples: (1) our main sample, (2) a sample in which we exclude countries below the 5th percentile (deep autocracies) and above the 95th percentile (top-tier democracies), and (3) a sample in which we exclude countries below the 25th percentile (deep autocracies) and above the 75th percentile (top-tier democracies). We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE B.9
Effect of Conflict on Freedom of Movement



Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2). The outcome variable is the freedom of movement index, which measures how easy it is for citizens to move abroad. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

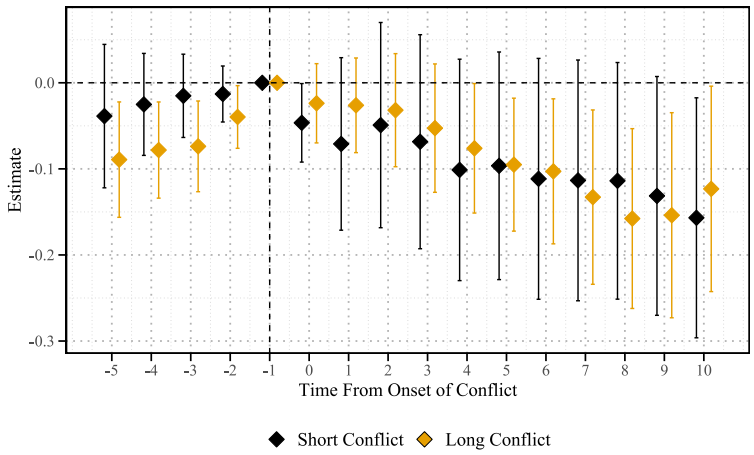
FIGURE B.10
Effect of Conflict on Defense Spending



Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2). The outcome variable is defense spending as a share of GDP. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

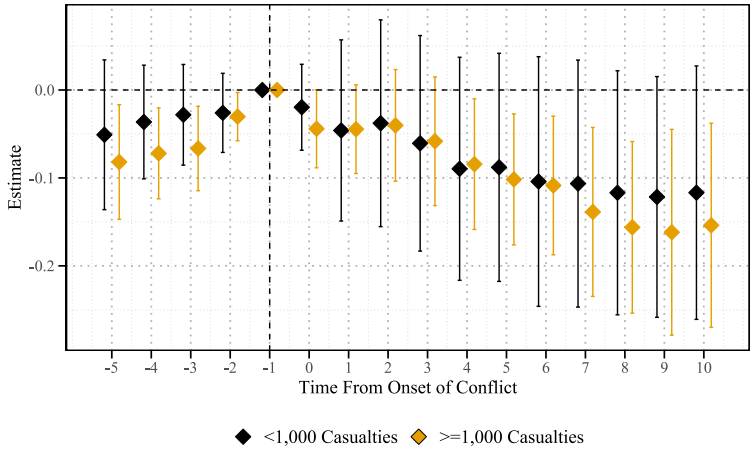
C. Additional Results for the Heterogeneity Analysis

FIGURE C.1
Effect of Conflict on Democracy - Decomposition by Length



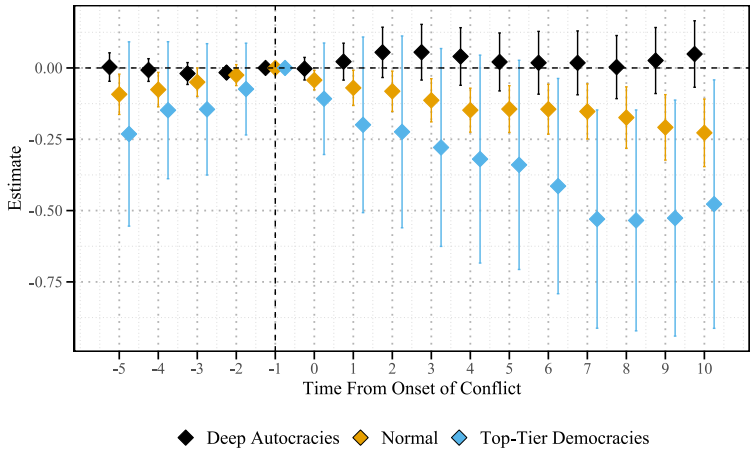
Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2). The outcome variable is the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. We split conflicts into two groups based on their length - conflicts with a length below the median are classified as short conflicts and conflicts with a length above the median are classified as long conflicts. We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE C.2
Effect of Conflict on Democracy - Decomposition by Intensity



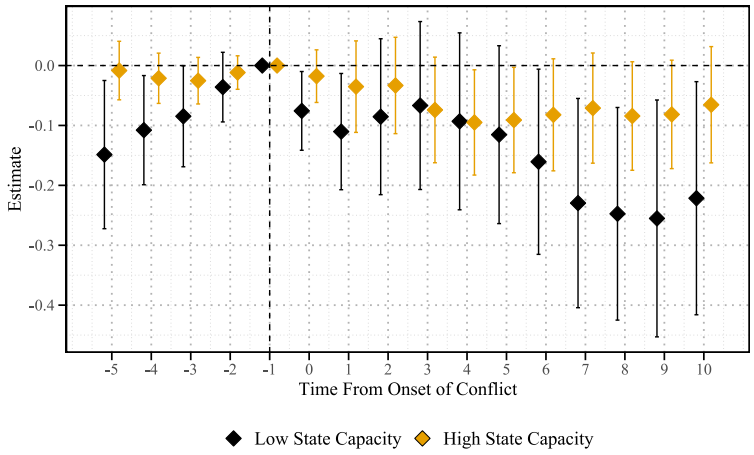
Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2). The outcome variable is the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. We split conflicts into two groups based on their total number of casualties. We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE C.3
Effect of Conflict on Democracy - Decomposition by Initial Level of Democracy



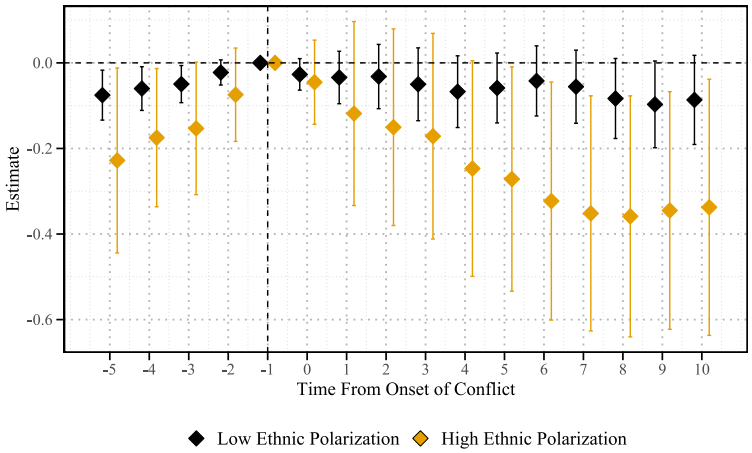
Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2). The outcome variable is the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. Using all countries in the world, and for each year, we compute the 25th and 75th percentile of the aggregate democracy index. We classify a conflict as one that involves deep autocracies if the minimum of the aggregate democracy index across all treated countries in the year that precedes the onset of conflict is below the 25th percentile. We classify a conflict as one that involves top-tier democracies if the minimum of the aggregate democracy index across all treated countries in the year that precedes the onset of conflict is above the 75th percentile. The remaining conflicts are classified as "normal". The sample with only deep autocracies has 39,760 observations, the sample with "normal" countries has 96,314 observations, and the sample with only top-tier democracies has 30,987 observations. We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE C.4
Effect of Conflict on Democracy - Decomposition by Initial State Capacity



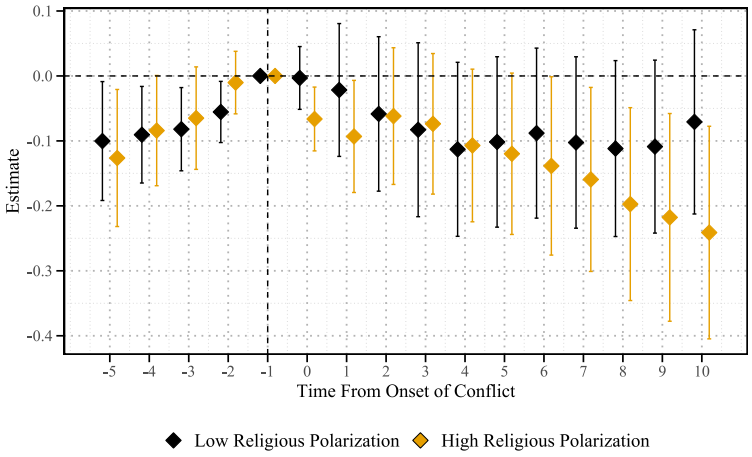
Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2). The outcome variable is the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. Our measure of state capacity is government revenue as a share of GDP. We aggregate this measure at the conflict level by taking the average across all treated countries in the period that precedes the onset of conflict. Using all conflicts in our sample, we compute the cross-sectional median. Conflicts with a level of state capacity above the median are classified as conflicts involving countries with a high state capacity while the remaining conflicts are classified as conflicts involving countries with a low state capacity. We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE C.5
Effect of Intrastate Conflict on Democracy - Role of Ethnic Polarization



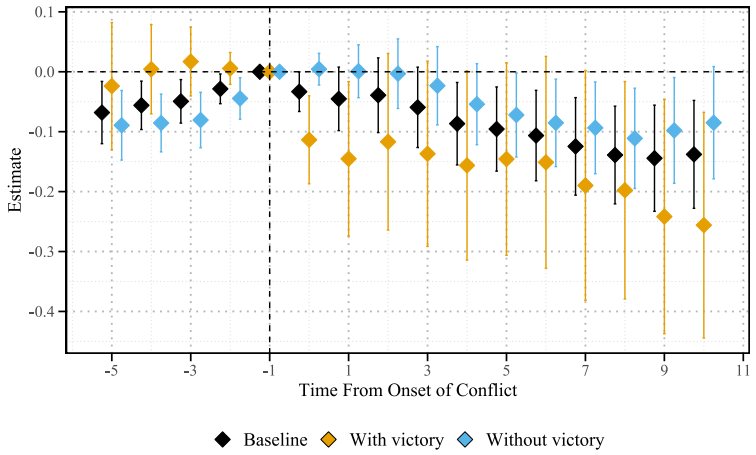
Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2) using only intrastate conflicts. The outcome variable is the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. We split countries into two groups using the measure of ethnic polarization developed by Esteban, Mayoral and Ray (2012), which is not time-varying and the cross-sectional median. Countries below the median are classified as having low polarization, while countries above the median are classified as having high polarization. We then classify a conflict as involving low-polarization countries if at least one country involved has low ethnic polarization. Remaining conflicts are classified as high polarization. We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE C.6
Effect of Intrastate Conflict on Democracy - Role of Religious Polarization



Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2) using only intrastate conflicts. The outcome variable is the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. We split countries into two groups using the measure of religious polarization developed by Esteban, Mayoral and Ray (2012), which is not time-varying and the cross-sectional median. Countries below the median are classified as having low polarization, while countries above the median are classified as having high polarization. We then classify a conflict as involving low-polarization countries if at least one country involved has low religious polarization. Remaining conflicts are classified as high polarization. We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE C.7
Effect of Conflict on Democracy - Decomposition by Resolution



Notes. This figure presents the results of estimating equation (2). The outcome variable is the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index. We include conflict-country and conflict-region-year fixed effects. The treated group contains countries involved in that conflict and the control group contains countries that are not involved in that conflict and are not involved in any conflict in the event window. We estimate equation (2) in three samples: (1) using all conflicts in our final sample, (2) using only conflicts for which we observe a victory, and (3) using only conflicts for which we do not observe a victory. We present the average treatment effects over time, using the year before the start of the conflict as the base. We cluster the errors at the conflict level and display 95% confidence intervals.

D. Additional Results for Mechanisms

TABLE D.1
VICTORY AND CHANGES IN DEMOCRACY

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
$\Delta \log \text{Dem}$	0.201	-0.152	0.038	-0.235	-0.252
	(0.134)	(0.194)	(0.119)	(0.170)	(0.187)
$(\Delta \log \text{Dem})^2$	-0.444***	-0.466**	-0.304**	-0.388*	-0.390*
	(0.125)	(0.169)	(0.110)	(0.149)	(0.156)
Sample	Full	Full	Full	Full	Intrastate
Country FE		✓		✓	✓
Decade FE			✓	✓	✓
Observations	274	274	274	274	200

Notes. This table shows the results of estimating equation (3), where the outcome variable takes the value of one if the country wins the conflict, and zero if otherwise. We consider observations only for conflicts in which a victory takes place. We include country and decade fixed effects as well as the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index in the period that precedes the onset of conflict as a control. We consider two explanatory variables: (1) the change in the logarithm of the aggregate democracy index between the onset and the end of the conflict, and (2) the square of this change. $***$, $**$, and $*$ denote significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.